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Japanese drop their traditional politeness over nuclear crisis

Fishermen, students, workers and small-town officials publicly blame Tepco and the government.

By John M. Glionna and Kenji Hall, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Tokyo

Kenji Kadota long followed the dual credo drilled into him during childhood: Hide your anger and trust the powers that be.

Yet in the wake of last month's triple whammy of earthquake, tsunami and radiation release, the 55-year-old construction chief has thrown all such cultural lessons out the window.

Kadota faults the firm that runs the crippled Fukushima Daiichi power plant for its mishandling of the nuclear crisis that has followed the March 11 natural disasters. He believes dithering public officials have compounded the public's anxiety by withholding information about the true dangers facing people who live near the plant.

So for the first time in his life, Kadota is speaking up. He's joined a growing chorus of college students, ruddy-faced fishermen, small-town mayors and even a combative prefecture governor voicing dissatisfaction in a manner highly uncommon in a nation known for taking politeness to the extreme.

"Japanese are raised to keep their feelings to themselves, but now that's impossible," said Kadota, who complained that officials failed to deliver water and emergency supplies to his hometown of Iwaki, not far from the stricken plant. "We've been abandoned. And I am angry."

Waging public protests or posting tirades on Twitter and YouTube, Japanese citizens blame both government officials and Tokyo Electric Power Co. for the release of dangerous radioactive isotopes into the air, soil and sea.

"There was already a small segment of people who distrusted nuclear power. But the rest of the public did not have a strong opinion about it, or if they were uneasy they didn't express it," said Yukio Maeda, a professor at the University of Tokyo's Institute of Social Science. "The nuclear accident has made people feel uneasy and in danger, and that has triggered people to express their fears and anger out loud."

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The Fukushima plant was not built to withstand earthquakes or tsunamis of the scale of the ones last month, and the blame for design flaws or limitations probably isn't Tepco's alone. Cozy ties between government regulators and industry executives and complacency about safety may have been as much a factor, many believe. And after disaster struck, human error, confusion and miscommunication appear to have slowed the response.

Still, Tepco has borne the brunt of the public backlash. Officials acknowledged they received an average of 40,000 public complaints per day during the first weeks after the quake. In Tokyo, police were recently assigned to guard utility worker dormitories and headquarters as hundreds of protesters called for an end to nuclear power.

People on the Internet have demanded that company executives be punished. Some suggest that bosses should be forced to work inside the damaged plant. Salaries and home addresses of some executives have been posted online. One post even began, "How to execute a Tepco executive."

Fukushima Gov. Yuhei Sato has seen his prefecture's farm products register elevated radioactive levels. Soon after the disaster, Sato refused to meet with Tepco President Masataka Shimizu, whose entourage showed up to offer the usual Japanese display of contrition: bowing and apologizing.

"There is just no way for me to accept their apology," Sato told a TV reporter, citing "the anxiety, anger and exasperation" felt by Fukushima residents.

In Minamisoma, a town near the damaged reactors, Mayor Katsunobu Sakurai has lashed out against Tepco and the government for the lack of information about the continuing peril. He recently went online to make his case about the "injustice" of his town's predicament. In a 10-minute English-subtitled video posted on YouTube, Sakurai said the government's lack of leadership has made life extremely difficult for residents.

"Even volunteers and those delivering relief supplies have no choice but to enter the city at their own risk," he said. "Residents are being forced into starvation."

Fishermen call the utility's response to the crisis insulting, incompetent and unforgivable, especially the utility's dumping of more than 10,000 tons of contaminated water into the ocean without even consulting them.

Seafood accounts for about half of Japan's \$3 billion in annual food exports, and overseas customers are shunning the catch no matter what part of the country it comes from. The radioactive danger was adding salt to the wound. About 18,500 fishing vessels were damaged or lost in the natural disaster.

"Tokyo Electric and the government share responsibility for this situation. It is unforgivable," the National Fishery Corporative Joint Assn. said in a statement. "All those who are living and sustaining their lives on the sea are feeling strong rage against this irresponsible behavior."

This month, about 150,000 quake and tsunami victims still languish in evacuation shelters. Many are calling for more compensation than the \$12,000 per household that will reportedly be offered by the company.

In Kawamata, a town whose residents were advised to evacuate, residents want \$60,000 per household and \$3,500 per person to cover the costs of finding new schools and day care, moving offices and factories.

Journalists are also going on the offensive. At a news conference last week, Shimizu was peppered with questions for nearly two hours, including one exchange that began with a question about his whereabouts on March 11.

Dressed in a blue utility jacket worn by officials during disasters, the executive said he was in Osaka and didn't get back to Tokyo until the following day.

The questioner persisted, calling the company's response "meaningless and too late."

"We did our best to deal with the situation," Shimizu replied.

"You did your best and the reactor building exploded," the reporter shouted. "Is that the best you can do?"

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