

One year after 3/11: First anniversary of the Fukushima Catastrophe
European Parliament, Brussels
7 March 2012

The Fukushima Nuclear Accident and Japanese Public Opinion Kawasaki Akira (Peace Boat)

Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate today. I would like to report about the influence of the Fukushima nuclear accident on Japanese public opinion.

Following the Second World War, Japanese national policy has been to oppose nuclear weapons while promoting nuclear power, and the majority of citizens were also in support of this. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which took the lives of over 200,000 people in an instant in 1945, planted the fear of nuclear weapons in the Japanese people, as well as the firm resolve to never allow such a tragedy to be repeated. Post-war Japan introduced a new Peace Constitution, the Three Non-Nuclear Principles stating that Japan will neither possess nor manufacture nuclear weapons, and developed economically without relying on the military industry. Of course, it is a fact that Japan has relied upon the United States' nuclear weapons through its strategic alliance. However even with such contradictions Japanese public sentiment has been consistently against nuclear weapons.

After the hydrogen bomb testing by the US at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1954, there was an incident where a Japanese fishing boat was showered with radioactive fallout. There were severe health effects on the crew, and the public were threatened by the risk of contaminated fish. In the face of this new tragedy even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people stood up and a strong movement calling for the prohibition of nuclear weapons began. This was the point of origin of the Japanese anti-nuclear movement.

However, around the same time, the ideology of Atoms for Peace was being advocated in the United States, and propaganda promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy was being launched on a global scale. In Japan, the mass media joined political and economic leaders to play a large role in the development of a campaign for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. For several years from 1955 Expos to promote peaceful use were held in Tokyo and other parts throughout Japan. These were carried out in by Japanese newspaper companies in close cooperation with the United States Government. In this way, the foundations for Japanese policy and public opinion in support of the peaceful use of nuclear energy were set in the 1950s and 1960s.

Of course at the time there was a movement against nuclear power. Anti-nuclear energy actions around the country were particularly active in 1986 following the Chernobyl accident. However, the following points were persuasive in promoting the creation of 54 nuclear reactors in earthquake-prone Japan.

Firstly, Japan lacks natural resources. Continued reliance upon imported oil would jeopardize Japan's energy security. Thus it is vital to develop nuclear energy and complete the nuclear fuel cycle.

Second, it is possible to use nuclear energy for safe and peaceful purposes. With Japan's high technical expertise security can be guaranteed.

Third – and this is a more recently strong claim – considering global warming, nuclear power is necessary as a clean energy which does not emit CO₂. That need is on a global scale, and so Japan should even be contributing internationally through exporting nuclear power plants.

It was based on these kinds of logic that the nuclear power industry, the government, scientists and the media carried out propaganda. Electricity utility companies invested huge amounts of money into commercials showing that nuclear power was safe. These materials were even used for education in schools.

However since the Fukushima nuclear accident people have come to realise that they had been deceived by this myth of safety. Those people who had been promoting this myth have come to be known ironically as the “nuclear power village.” Those from the business community, bureaucracy and experts who gained from nuclear power created a closed group, and monopolized information, authority and interests. Their influence was strong, and academics who raised concerns about the dangers of nuclear power had opportunities for advancement taken from them. If anyone made a negative comment about nuclear power on television, they would either lose the opportunity to speak again, or have to change their stance and agree not to touch on this taboo.

In the aftermath of Fukushima, the influence of this nuclear village is now shaking. It is clear to anyone that the manipulation and hiding of important information related to the accident by TEPCO and the government led to confusion regarding evacuation of residents, and was a cause of making the damage much greater. Several cases such as electricity companies and local governors colluding to force the construction and operation of nuclear power plants through for example leading opinions at local public meetings have come to light.

Disclosure of such scandals are not only through investigative reporting by mainstream media; independent sharing of information by citizens through the internet and social networking sites has also made a significant contribution.

According to opinion polls, over 70% of the Japanese public are now in favour of moving away from nuclear power. Japan, which has long believed in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, is now standing at a critical turning point. However, the nuclear village still has great influence within policy makers and the mass media. It is like a large tug-of-war is now taking place in Japan.

The short-term is a battle over the restart of nuclear power plants. Citizens all over Japan, in fear of an accident like Fukushima happening again, are opposing the restart of nuclear power plants after their regular maintenance checks. As a result, only 2 of Japan's 54 nuclear reactors are now in operation. However, the government and electricity companies are trying to push for their restart.

In the long-term, the struggle is over the pace of moving away from nuclear energy. Decreasing reliance on nuclear energy is already official government policy, however the pace is under debate. Within the government, discussion is going on as to whether the maximum limit of years of operation for a nuclear power plant should be 40 years, or if this should be allowed up to 60 years.

A fundamental review of the framework of Japan's energy policy is planned for this summer. And this coming April, Japan's nuclear safety agency will be detached from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and combined with the functions of other related entities into a new entity, tentatively called the Nuclear Regulatory Agency, under the Ministry of the Environment (MOE). How much this new regulatory agency will be able to break through the existing monopoly and rule of the nuclear village will be a crucial key for the future.

New developments are also being seen within civil society movements. In September last year, 60,000 people gathered at a mass anti-nuclear power demonstration in Tokyo. This is a size rarely seen in Japan. Demonstrations of all kinds are continuing regularly each week throughout Japan, and citizens are mobilizing through Facebook and Twitter.

10,000 people from 30 countries participated in the Global Conference for a Nuclear Power Free World organized by Peace Boat, Green Action and other organizations in January, and over 100,000 people watched the conference live via the internet. Such actions including international solidarity are also expanding.

A further example is the movement calling for a national referendum to break away from nuclear energy, which is gaining more and more attention. Petitions in Tokyo and Osaka calling for a referendum have been successful. The momentum to break away from nuclear energy is also gaining speed amongst Mayors. A group of Mayors who attended the Yokohama Conference are now preparing to soon officially launch a national network of Mayors against nuclear power.

At such a significant turning point, it is vital that citizens in Japan and around the world connect and work together. The Japanese people are now looking to learn from successful examples and lessons from throughout the globe. Support from overseas for those affected by the Fukushima accident is urgently needed. I hope that this conference can be an opportunity to bring us one step closer to cooperation between citizens to create a world free of nuclear power.

Thank you very much.