

Cables show U.S. criticized anti-terror measures at Japan's nuclear plants

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U.S. government officials were concerned that Japan was taking a lackadaisical approach toward defending its nuclear power plants against terrorist attacks, diplomatic cables show.

Although Japanese officials acknowledged the potential threat from al-Qaida, they were also hesitant to accept a proposal from the U.S. side to share confidential information about nuclear facilities.

The Asahi Shimbun obtained about 7,000 diplomatic cables dated between 2006 and February 2010 from WikiLeaks.

A number of cables, many of which were issued after U.S. Embassy officials inspected nuclear power plants around Japan, were devoted to nuclear energy policy. The cables showed the U.S. side was more interested in security at Japan's nuclear power plants than in measures to protect against earthquakes and tsunami.

For example, one cable from November 2006 was issued after a visit to the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO).

The cable describes the number of entrances at the plant, whether armed police officers were stationed there and the cooperation between the police and the Japan Coast Guard.

A report about a visit to the Shimane nuclear plant operated by Chugoku Electric Power Co. around the same time describes security measures, such as the fence around the ground perimeter, detection sensors and security cameras.

Other cables refer to visits to the Tomari plant operated by Hokkaido Electric Power Co. and the Genkai plant operated by Kyushu Electric Power Co.

In November 2005, a U.S. Embassy official in charge of environmental, science and technology matters was the only foreigner allowed to observe the first anti-terrorism training exercise conducted at the Mihama plant in Fukui Prefecture operated by Kansai Electric Power Co.

The cable describing that visit said Japan "is beginning to recognize that external threats do exist to its 54 units scattered throughout the country."

However, the report also criticized the training exercise, which proceeded on a predetermined script.

The "drill did not test the operator's security response to the terrorist attack on the plant," the cable said.

A separate cable, describing an anti-terror training exercise in September 2006 in Ibaraki Prefecture, said some participants were reading from the script. It also noted that some local residents knew beforehand when the evacuation exercise would begin.

In February 2007, high-ranking officials with the U.S. State Department in charge of nuclear energy visited Japan and met with their counterparts.

According to the cable that reported on the visit, U.S. officials pointed out that armed guards were not stationed at nuclear-related facilities in Tokai, Ibaraki Prefecture.

Science ministry officials are quoted as saying “that the plant operator, local police and national police determine the threat for individual plants and the necessity for armed guards.”

“There was not a sufficient threat to justify armed police at the (Tokai) site,” the ministry officials are quoted as saying.

However, the cable described Tokai as “a major plutonium storage site,” indicating that U.S. officials felt that armed guards were needed to prevent the theft of plutonium, which can be converted for use in nuclear weapons.

During the meeting, U.S. officials urged their Japanese counterparts to run background checks on all workers at nuclear power plants.

Science ministry officials explained that the Constitution prohibited the central government from making obligatory checks on all workers, including those at companies affiliated with nuclear power plants.

However, the cable added that science ministry officials “did admit that (Japanese government) background investigations may be going on ‘unofficially.’”

Another cable from September 2007 describes a visit to Japan by a delegation led by Steven Aoki, a deputy undersecretary for counterterrorism at the U.S. Energy Department.

U.S. officials explained to their Japanese counterparts about a briefing conducted by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency on the threat posed to Japanese facilities by North Korea, which was considered low at that time.

Japanese officials stressed the possible threat from al-Qaida and were quoted as saying that because the Japanese were “a staunch ally of the U.S. and have contributed to the mission in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have put themselves at risk.”

At the meeting, U.S. officials proposed an agreement to share confidential information related to nuclear facilities and protection of nuclear materials.

However, Japanese diplomats were passive, with one saying such an agreement “would require Diet approval, which would be difficult to get through,” according to the cable.

A separate cable from February 2008, only six months later, quotes a different Japanese diplomat as saying Japan would want to proceed carefully and “first to identify specific issues on which Japan would like to share information, and then to discuss the appropriate means to share that information. Identification of limited areas of information sharing might not require Diet approval.”

In contrast to U.S. interest in anti-terrorism measures, little attention was paid to steps taken to deal with possible natural disasters.

In July 2007, the Niigata Chuetsu-oki Earthquake caused a fire at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant and the leaking of radioactive materials into the atmosphere.

However, a cable dated July 17 issued from the U.S. Embassy only included reports on the accident by TEPCO and the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA).

Another cable the following day only stated that the Japanese government announced “there is no impact on the surrounding environment.”

In March 2006, the Kanazawa District Court ordered the suspension of operations at the No. 2 reactor of the Shika nuclear power plant operated by Hokuriku Electric Power Co., citing insufficient anti-quake measures.

A cable issued at that time showed U.S. Embassy officials asked NISA officials about possible effects on Japan’s nuclear energy policy from the ruling, not about anti-quake measures.

In the cable, an official describes the NISA position that “the reactor is safe and that all safety analyses were appropriately conducted. As a result, NISA saw no reason why” the reactor should be shut down.

An official with the Federation of Electric Power Companies who was also contacted “personally does not feel that others in the federation were overly concerned about the result of the lawsuit.”

The cable’s writer states, “What is surprising in this case, however, is the fact that the plaintiffs won.”

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<http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201105090151.html>