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First IAEA report on Fukushima

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Mike Weightman surveys damage near the seawater intakes of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant during the IAEA tour

The handling of the Fukushima nuclear crisis was "exemplary," said a preliminary report from the International Atomic Energy Agency, and could eventually show "what can be achieved in responding to such extreme nuclear events."

After a week's fact-finding mission that involved touring nuclear sites and talking to officials, managers and engineers, head UK safety regulator Mike Weightman has delivered a preliminary summary of his group's findings. The full report will be presented to a ministerial meeting held at the IAEA's Vienna headquarters later this month.

Some of the findings come as no surprise - "The tsunami hazard for several sites was underestimated" -

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while others praise Japan's "extremely open" stance in sharing information with the IAEA team. There was no dissection of precise actions by the various corporate and government players either before or after the tsunami, with this kind of detail inevitably coming in subsequent reports on a much longer timescale.

Many findings matched the regulatory considerations already under review in national jurisdictions: diversity and redundancy of safety systems, defence in depth and physical separation all in the context of extreme natural events. Singled out for praise was the J-Village near the damaged Fukushima Daiichi plant, which gave "highly professional back-up to secure the protection of workers at the site." The accident showed the value of hardened on-site emergency response centres, which "should be provided for all major nuclear facilities with severe accident potential."

The response of Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) by "dedicated, determined and expert staff under extremely arduous conditions has been exemplary, and resulted in the best approach to securing safety given the exceptional circumstances," said Weightman.

The overall response in Japan was also praised. He said the government's protection of the public (mainly by means of early evacuation and use of potassium-iodide pills) was "impressive and extremely well organised." Future monitoring of the health of the public as well as workers "would be beneficial" although "to date, no health effects have been reported in any person as a result of radiation

exposure."

Weightman alluded to the possibility that the areas near the Fukushima Daiichi plant could return to normal, given proper planning and perhaps remediation. He said the roadmap to stabilise the plant should be thought of as part of a wider plan, "that could include the remediation of areas affected off site affected by radiological release to allow people to resume their normal lives. Thus demonstrating to the world what can be achieved in responding to such extreme nuclear events."

Weightman on the Fukushima Daiichi staff

"The operators were faced with a catastrophic, unprecedented emergency situation with no power, reactor control or instrumentation, and in addition to this, severely affected communications systems both within and external to the site."

"They had to work in darkness with almost no instrumentation and control systems to secure the safety of six reactors, six associated fuel pools, a common fuel pool and dry cask storage facilities."

"Despite brave and sometimes novel attempts of the operational staff to restore control and cool the reactors and spent fuel, severe damage of the fuel and a series of explosions occurred."

"These explosions caused further destruction at the site, making the scene faced by operators even more demanding and dangerous."

"The response on the site by dedicated, determined and expert

staff under extremely arduous conditions has been exemplary, and resulted in the best approach to securing safety given the exceptional circumstances."

*Researched and written
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