



JAPAN: TESTING THE STAMINA

Bert Edström

The series of disasters that have hit Japan are testing the stamina and resilience of the Japanese people. Having experienced disasters in the past, they have demonstrated an impressive stamina and ability to withstand the horrifying destruction caused by the earthquake and tsunami. The problems that have occurred with the collapse of the Fukushima nuclear plant make the Japanese face a disaster that might over-shadow most others' menaces to human security ever experienced by the hardened Japanese.

Radiation Alert

On Monday, high levels of radioactive materials were detected more than 100 kilometers from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. Ninety three thousand Becquerel of iodine-131 were detected in Hitachinaka in Ibaraki Prefecture and 13,000 Becquerel of cesium-137 per one square meter per day. Officials from the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) described levels as “very weak,” but Shigenobu Nagataki, professor emeritus at Nagasaki University, a radiation medicine specialist, said the cesium-137 level detected is “considerably high.” Iodine-131 measurement showed radiation levels 126.7 times the safety limits; drinking 0.5 liter of water containing this level of radioactivity for three days equals the limit of permitted exposure for one year. In Japan, radioactivity measurements nationwide on Sunday and Monday showed levels of 4,300, 790, 690 and 560 Becquerel in Yamagata, Saitama, Morioka and Tokyo’s Shinjuku Ward, respectively. For a Swede, these figures ring a bell. Any Swede recollecting the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 remembers that the safe level for food set by Swedish authorities was initially 200 Becquerel—it was later raised to 300, the figure still used.

On Wednesday, the front page news was that tap water in Tokyo was contaminated. Such reports are bound to worry the Japanese. To what degree can the reassuring reports issued by the Japanese government be trusted is a legitimate question. Its actions have not always been reassuring to the Japanese public or authorities in other countries.

When the government joined forces with the TEPCO power company by establishing a crisis committee with the company, it was a risky undertaking for the government. TEPCO has a lousy safety record and when its Managing Director Akio Komori broke down in tears at a press conference on March 19 and apologized to the public for having caused trou-

ble, it did not up the image of the company. Crying Japanese company bosses have been seen far too often now.

Government in Trouble

TEPCO’s soiled image might spill over to the government that is frantically fighting to counter the increasing worries among ordinary Japanese, victims or not, that the government is trying to cover up what it has been doing in the past. Reports are spreading of how only days before the disaster the government disregarded reports of serious problems at the nuclear power plants. If these kinds of reports are confirmed, it bodes ill for the government. The incumbent Prime Minister, Naoto Kan, will be held accountable once the effects of the disaster are under control.

Also Kan’s minister of economy, trade and industry, Banri Kaieda, is in trouble. He will probably have to find a new job soon, after news surfaced that the government had threatened to “punish” firefighters if they didn’t carry out an operation to spray water onto the damaged reactor. Mr. Kaieda might have a future if he returns to the talk shows he used to appear at frequently as a young promising politician, but his saga as minister could be over. Bullying Japan’s new heroes, the firefighters at the damaged power plants, is not what the public expects of a government minister.

The disaster is bound to have political implications not least in the domestic context. The top issues on the political agenda before the disaster are now resting, but eventually they will reappear with the added impacts of the disaster. Prime Minister Naoto Kan was re-elected on September 15 as chairman of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and continued as Prime Minister. Part of the reason Kan was kept by his party was not excellence in office but the sheer embarrassment among party workers at the prospect of sacking him after only



three months in office. Kan became the premier in May this year, when his predecessor Yukio Hatoyama suddenly quit after having seen the party's popularity decreasing. Electing Kan did not do much to improve the DPJ's standing in polls, and when he was re-elected as party chairman, the improvement of his popularity figures was brief. Before the disaster, both Kan's and the DPJ's popularity figures had reached dangerously low levels, and much talk was heard of calling snap elections. Kan waved away all such suggestions. Certainly, he and his party were in deep trouble, but when Hatoyama formed the DPJ-led coalition government after the DPJ's landslide victory in the Lower House elections on August 30, 2009, he made a commitment on part of the DPJ that it would sit the full four years that the constitution allows. Few previous MP cohorts in the postwar period had done so, so it was a commitment that made headlines. The DPJ is a party that is prone to issue promises to the people. The problem is, of course, to keep them.

Fatal Outcome for the Kan Government?

When disaster struck, Prime Minister Kan showed that he had learnt from the horrible way that the government acted in the wake of the Kobe earthquake in 1995, when Prime Minister Murayama was so stunned that the central authorities were far too slow to act. Kan immediately took command. Learning from the catastrophic lack of information dissemination in 1995, both the Prime Minister and the government's No. 2, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano, have held scores of press conferences in an obvious effort to disseminate information about how the disasters are evolving and how the hardships are tackled, informing about what the government and other authorities are doing to ease the burdens for the victims. With victims counting hundreds of thousands and the death toll increasing by the hour, their efforts are worth respect. But more admired are the firefighters who are making heroic efforts to manage the nuclear disaster that risks going out of hand. Flashbacks to the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 remind the Japanese that their heroes very well may pay with

their lives.

Prime Minister Kan started his political career as an activist, and he has demonstrated that it is not bad for Japan to be led by a politician who began at grassroots level, as a contrast to the political blue bloods that the, until 2009, seemingly eternally ruling LDP put up when a new party leader/Prime Minister had to chosen to replace a predecessor that had been worn down, often in a surprising short time in office.

Most impressive has been the performance of Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano. Steadfastly standing in the rostrum, he has been untiringly updating the people, disseminating information to worried citizens and the insatiable media about what's going on and what's being done. The Japanese are not prone to panic and Mr. Edano's stalwart line manager performance has helped greatly in avoiding panic. His performance has been so extraordinary that he is now emerging as a serious contender for party leader/prime minister, if Prime Minister Kan stumbles or trips over the gargantuan task of managing a catastrophe that may very well be of epic dimensions, if the nuclear disaster cannot be kept under control.

Mr. Kan keeps spirits up. In a televised speech, he insisted that Japan will overcome the catastrophe: "We will rebuild Japan from scratch. In our history, this small island nation has made miraculous economic growth thanks to the efforts of all Japanese citizens. That is how Japan was built."

Japan's history testifies that Mr. Kan is surely correct about the outcome for the country and the nation. But Kan himself will probably face rough going when the actions taken by his government will be scrutinized, after the situation has been brought under control and normal political work commences in the Diet.

Bert Edström is a Senior Research Fellow with the Institute for Security and Development Policy.

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