

Inside Japan's Nuclear Meltdown

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In the desperate hours and days after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the fate of thousands of Japanese citizens fell into the hands of a small corps of engineers, firemen and soldiers who risked their lives to prevent the Daiichi nuclear complex from complete meltdown. Now, one year later, FRONTLINE presents their story, with rare footage from inside the plant and eyewitness testimony.

The film, based on the first interviews with some workers who are still prohibited from talking about the disaster, reveals how close the world came to a nuclear nightmare following the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. With Japan's central government struggling to get accurate information and relations straining between officials and TEPCO, the facility's owner, plant engineers improvised in the dark in an attempt to cool the crippled reactors. "When I heard the diesel generators were lost," reactor inspector Takashi Sato tells FRONTLINE, "I couldn't square that with reality. I was stunned." As the fuel started to melt, a special group of soldiers tried to inject water directly into the core of one of the reactors. "Just as we were about to get out of the car to connect the hose, it exploded." Col. Shinji Iwakuma says, "Radioactive matter was leaking in through the bindings of our masks due to the blast. Our dosimeter alarms were ringing constantly."

Fukushima residents were making their own life-and-death choices. Farmer Norio Kimura, whose father, wife and youngest daughter were missing, had to decide whether to abandon his search in the rubble for family members or risk exposure to radiation for himself and his surviving daughter. "I now thought it was dangerous to stay. Iodine tablets were being handed out in the village," he tells FRONTLINE. "I had to take her somewhere safe. We had to get far away from the nuclear plant."

Meanwhile, the nuclear experts and officials in Prime Minister Naoto Kan's office watched as the crisis spiraled out of control. On a visit to the plant, Kan, who was later criticized for his handling of the emergency, obtained a pledge from the plant manager to send in a suicide squad of workers to vent the reactor if necessary. "For me it was a very difficult decision," Kan says. "But I thought it had to be done."

And after the first of three reactor buildings exploded, many thought they were finished. "In the control room people were saying we were finished," Takashi Sato, the reactor inspector, tells FRONTLINE. "They were saying it quietly, but they were saying it. We felt we had to flee. This was the end." A group of workers, now known as "the Fukushima Fifty," were left behind in the radioactive plant to turn the tide in the battle to prevent a meltdown that could have rendered the area uninhabitable for hundreds of years and resulted in dire global health and economic consequences.

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CREDITS

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