



From inspectors who abandoned the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant as it succumbed to disaster to a delay in disclosing radiation leaks, Japan's response to the nuclear accident caused by the March tsunami fell tragically short, a government-appointed investigative panel said on Monday.

The problems, which the panel said had exacerbated the extent of the disaster, were outlined in a 500-page interim report detailing an investigation into Japan's response to the calamitous events that unfolded at the Fukushima plant after the March 11 quake and tsunami knocked out all of the site's power.

Three of the plant's six reactors overheated and suffered fuel meltdowns, and hydrogen explosions blew the tops off three reactor buildings, leading to a massive leak of radiation at levels not seen since Chernobyl in 1986.

The panel attacked the use of the term "soteigai," which translates to "unforeseen," by plant and government officials to describe the unprecedented scale of the disaster and to explain why they were unable to stop it. Running a nuclear power plant required officials to foresee the unforeseen, said the panel's chairman, Yotaro Hatamura, a professor emeritus in engineering at the University of Tokyo.

"There was a lot of talk of soteigai, but that only bred perceptions among the public that officials were shirking their responsibilities," Mr. Hatamura said.

According to the report, a final version of which is due by mid-2012, the authorities grossly underestimated the risks tsunamis posed to the plant. The charges echoed previous charges made by nuclear critics and acknowledged by the operator of the plant, Tokyo Electric Power.

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