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Nuclear 'Bad' News Can't Replace Rational Analysis: Commentary

Commentary by Nils J. Diaz | March 15, 2011 03:35PM ET

(Bloomberg) -- The devastation in Japan is more than can be explained, in terms of lost lives, human suffering, economic loss and socioeconomic impact. The overall tragedy is more than enough to jam the airwaves and pack the halls of government everywhere.

And, yet, here we are again experiencing the fascination with nuclear "bad" news. There is as much coverage for the damaged reactors as for the rest of the tragedy.

It appears that we'll continue to debate the tsunami-caused reactor accidents long after we forget about the human toll and the infrastructure destruction of Japan. In relative terms, it makes no sense; a rational and balanced analysis is needed to discern what, if any, are the policy and regulatory implications of the reactor accidents.

First, it's clear that nuclear power plants aren't indestructible and there's no way to make them so. They are better than the majority of other major industrial structures and systems, but not perfect.

The nuclear power plants in Japan were still standing after the earthquake and tsunami when most structures around them were gone. U.S. law demands that reactors provide reasonable assurance of adequate protection of public health and safety, and they do.

Dangerous Precedent

It does not demand zero risk; there is no such thing as zero risk and it would be a dangerous precedent to establish it.

Zero risk from automobiles? Zero risk from coal burning? More is demanded from nuclear plants and they do more, but cannot give perfection.

To put this in perspective, the overwhelming majority of nuclear plants in the world aren't subjected to the forces unleashed by the earthquake-tsunami combination that damaged a few nuclear power plants in Japan. They have safety systems capable of withstanding the maximum credible (historic) conditions from external events, like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and even tsunamis.

Japan's 2011 earthquake-tsunami combination clearly exceeded the worst expected conditions, and reactor damage occurred. It must be said that Japan's reactors suffered a triple whammy: a massive earthquake, a terrifying tsunami and the limited short-term support from a resource-depleted Japanese infrastructure, bravely defying the odds but overwhelmed by the sheer dimensions of the destruction.

There are few places on earth with nuclear power plants that could face a comparable natural disaster.

Safety Requirements

So, what is a nation that needs nuclear power, such as the U.S., going to do? Help Japan and then, rationally and systematically, ensure that our existing plants continue to meet or exceed the strict operational safety requirements currently providing protection to public health and safety, as evidenced by the fact that no member of the public has died or been seriously harmed by the operation of our nuclear power plants.

We would, of course, review where we stand, energy-wise, economically and strategically on the issue of deployment of new reactors. New nuclear reactors have already been designed with safety improvements that would satisfy seismic and tsunami conditions adequate for the region of emplacement.

In fact, the new class of passively cooled reactors doesn't need the external emergency cooling systems to keep the core cooled.

The issue of nuclear power deployment shouldn't be hostage to a once-in-a-lifetime natural disaster and nuclear core damage, probably at the Three Mile Island level.

The U.S. energy-policy debate should include the benefits of clean nuclear power, as well as the manageable risks, and provide solutions that serve the needs of our nation.

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Nils J. Diaz is former chairman of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and managing director of The ND2 Group, which advises governments on developing new nuclear energy options. Source: Nils J. Diaz

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(Nils J. Diaz is former chairman of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and managing director of [The ND2 Group](#), which advises governments on developing new nuclear energy options.)

To contact the writer of this column: Nils J. Diaz at nils.diaz@nd2group.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: David Rapp at drapp5@bloomberg.net