

MEDIA RELEASE

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Green Cross Study Trip to Japan from 27 September to 3 October 2015

Schedule to decommission the damaged Fukushima reactors giving priority to the safe disposal of contaminated water

During the Green Cross study trip to Japan, Prof. Jonathan M. Samet, Director of the Institute for Global Health at the University of Southern California (USC), will discuss the results of the 2015 Fukushima Report, which was prepared at the initiative of Green Cross Switzerland.

Approximately 32 million people in Japan are exposed to radioactive fallout related to the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. These are individuals who were exposed to radiation or other stress factors resulting from the accident and are therefore at risk due to potential long-term and short-term effects of these exposures. Based on the calculations of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the total atmospheric release of radioactive material from the Fukushima nuclear disaster (iodine-131, cesium-134, cesium-137, and noble gases) was estimated to be less than 15 percent of the total radiation emitted by the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. However, the number of people affected by radiation in Japan has tripled compared to Chernobyl. According to the Fukushima Report, water leakage at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, in addition to the radioactive material initially released into the ocean, continues to be problem four years after the accident.

The decommissioning schedule now calls for the removal of the melted fuel rods within forty months

The travel programme also includes a visit to the city of Tomioka which was divided into three different zones of restriction based on the level of contamination. Naohiro Masuda of TEPCO, in charge of decontamination and decommissioning of the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant, will discuss a new plan of action giving priority to the safety of people and the environment over the speed of work. The government of Japan has approved a revision to the schedule to accommodate this approach. Based on the new risk assessments of the clean-up of the damaged nuclear power plant, the safe disposal of water contaminated by radiation takes precedence because the contaminated water leaking into the environment poses a significant risk. On the other hand, caution is advised with respect to the most difficult job, the removal of the melted fuel debris, because people and the environment will be at an even higher risk if the work is completed hastily and under pressure. As a result, according to the updated decommissioning schedule, the high-risk task of removing the melted fuel rods from the cooling basins of reactors 1 to 3 will now take forty instead of four months. At this time, 300 tonnes of groundwater are entering the destroyed reactor buildings every day and have to be pumped out. Therefore, based on the revised decommissioning schedule the inflow of groundwater must be reduced to less than 100 tonnes per day by the end of 2016. One of the reasons is to optimise the disposal of contaminated water. To do so, the contaminated groundwater in the area of the reactor buildings enclosed by underground ice walls is pumped out, decontaminated and released into the ocean. "The removal of the melted fuel rods from the reactor safety vessels is scheduled to start in 2021. The removal presents an unprecedented challenge and requires the use of a robotic arm. Determining the most appropriate methods for the removal of the melted fuel rods from each reactor alone will take two years", Masuda said and added that the decontamination and decommissioning of the damaged nuclear power plant in Fukushima is still expected to take 30 to 40 years.

Eight percent of the land area of Japan has been contaminated by radiation since the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. Some 160,000 people were evacuated and relocated to emergency housing. The Social and Medical Care programme, designed to help people living in the contaminated areas to help themselves, has been in development in Japan since the spring of 2011. Based on the experience and the aid provided in the Chernobyl region, Green Cross Switzerland is focusing on providing know-how in dealing with exposure to radiation and contaminated food by establishing family clubs and arranging summer camps for children and adolescents. In Japan, the Social and Medical Care programme of Green Cross Switzerland is being developed and managed in cooperation with Green Cross Japan. Learning how to deal with soil, water, air, and food contaminated by radiation is a major concern for the residents of Fukushima. Families worry greatly about the impact of the exposure to radiation on the health of their children.

The purpose of the Legacy of the Cold War and Social and Medical Care programmes of Green Cross Switzerland is to overcome the consequential damages caused by industrial and military disasters and to advocate the worldwide phasing out of nuclear energy. A top priority is the improvement of the quality of life of people affected by chemical, radioactive and other kinds of contamination and the promotion of sustainable development in the spirit of cooperation instead of confrontation. The goals of the Zewo-certified environmental organisation are supported by the Green Cross parliamentary group consisting of 25 members of the Swiss Council of States and 82 members of the Swiss National Council working across party lines.

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