

Fukushima: Worker safety takes back seat in dealing with nuclear crisis

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The problems continue to pile up at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, creating an unprecedented hazardous environment for the under-equipped front-line workers trying to bring the situation under control.

But given the potential widespread damage from the crisis, officials acknowledge that labor safety is not the top priority anymore.

“Under circumstances where there is no end to new problems faced, we cannot deny that the company is depending on the spirit of the workers,” an executive of Tokyo Electric Power Co., the plant operator, said. “Unless we are able to both secure workers’ safety while settling the nuclear accident, TEPCO will in the end face very serious criticism.”

The workers continue to risk exposure to high levels of radiation in their efforts to restore cooling mechanisms for the reactor cores. But the public is growing impatient for a quick end —or even significant progress — in the battle at the Fukushima plant, putting pressure on not only TEPCO but also the government.

“It is never good to have any kind of work that requires putting one’s life on the line,” a high-ranking official of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare said. “However, the importance of settling the situation at the nuclear plant goes beyond the range of labor policy. I cannot be confident about whether that or the safety of the workers should have priority.”

TEPCO has already faced harsh criticism concerning the safety of the workers.

Labor ministry officials began investigating the company after the utility admitted that workers were not all given portable dosimeters to check for radiation. But the investigation has its limits because officials cannot enter the plant grounds.

“The public is hoping the crisis at the nuclear plant is settled quickly, and that expectation could affect measures to be taken to ensure the safety of workers,” a labor ministry source said.

TEPCO officials said about 5,000 dosimeters were available before the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that crippled the plant. But the twin disasters left only 320 usable dosimeters.

TEPCO has since obtained dosimeters from other nuclear power plants for a sufficient supply. But before that, a regulation was revised to allow workers to share one dosimeter as long as they were exposed to less than 10 millisieverts of radiation and the group members were engaged in similar work.

“Because there are some locations where radiation levels are constantly changing, the new regulation does hold danger for the workers,” a TEPCO source said.

Satoshi Kamata, who has written extensively about labor issues, questioned TEPCO’s commitment to

the safety of its workers.

“There is the possibility that those working at the Fukushima plant have already been exposed to high levels of radiation, so doubts arise about whether TEPCO was serious about labor safety conditions,” Kamata said. “Because TEPCO is the only entity that can actually look after those conditions, it should obtain a good grasp of the situation and publicize what it knows.”

According to an official of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, the only place within the plant grounds where workers do not have to wear protective clothing against radiation is a two-story building built with high quake-resistant standards and high air-tightness.

Workers who have finished laying cables or removing contaminated water within the plant grounds shed their protective clothing and masks for radiation measurements before entering the special building. Because many workers stay overnight in the plant grounds, there are shortages of protective gear as well as fresh clothing.

TEPCO’s labor union has asked management for information about radiation levels at the plant as well as the health conditions of the workers.

“There will be a need for mass mobilization of workers so that no individual worker is exposed to radiation that exceeds legal standards. There will be a need for labor unions to understand the details about the working environment and to provide support so workers can work in safety,” a labor union source said.

Despite the dangers, the workers at the Fukushima plant appear determined to push on.

“Workers keep saying, ‘We will have to do something about the problem,’” a TEPCO source said.

Companies cooperating with TEPCO have conducted surveys of workers who might be asked to go to Fukushima. Although the surveys clearly stated that workers could decline with their identities concealed and no effects on their job evaluations, all those surveyed said they were willing to fight the crisis in Fukushima, the companies said.

One immediate measure being discussed to help the workers is raising the compensation amount given for hazardous work. The government has been much quicker on this issue.

The Defense Ministry decided on March 24 to increase by 1.5 times the amount given to members of the Self-Defense Forces who die or are left with disabilities as a result of working at the Fukushima nuclear plant. Families of SDF members who die can receive as much as 90 million yen (\$1.07 million) while those disabled can receive a maximum of 75.6 million yen.

Those amounts are similar to those for SDF members dispatched to Iraq as well as those patrolling against pirates off the coast of Somalia.

“Considering the dangers and difficulties of the work (at Fukushima), we decided that it was similar to Iraq and Somalia,” a Defense Ministry official said.

TEPCO executives, however, have been slower to commit to higher amounts paid for hazardous work.

Although TEPCO already has a three-level system for hazardous pay depending on radiation dangers, executives admitted they never expected a situation in which workers would have to toil amid continuous high radiation levels.

Some companies cooperating with TEPCO do not have hazardous pay arrangements that take into consideration situations such as the current one. The executives of those companies said they would review the system in line with what other companies sending workers to Fukushima do.

Experts said the central government would have to become involved to look after the safety of those working to end the crisis at the Fukushima plant.

“Japan’s compensation system for nuclear accidents has not emphasized protection of victims because it was preconditioned on the notion that a serious accident would never occur,” said Terumitsu Honma, head of the Aoyama Gakuin University Research Institute, who is knowledgeable about compensation for nuclear energy accidents.

“However, a serious accident is now unfolding, and workers have been exposed to radiation. There will be a need to create a totally new compensation system based on the actual dangers faced by the workers at the plant and nearby residents who have been affected,” he said.

P.S.

* Asahi, 2011/04/05:

<http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201104040147.html>