

Fukushima: Nuke workers at risk of overwork death

Depression, stress, poor sanitation, diet: doctor

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Tokyo Electric Power Co. workers engaged in efforts to stabilize the crisis-hit Fukushima No.1 nuclear plant are at risk of depression or death from overwork, a doctor who recently examined them said Wednesday.

The workers are not only undertaking dangerous work in severe conditions but also feel a sense of moral responsibility as employees of the operator of the crippled plant, Takeshi Tanigawa said in an interview.

Many of the workers have been exposed to multiple stresses, he said, as some of them barely survived the March 11 quake and tsunami, as well as subsequent hydrogen explosions that wrecked the plant's reactors, while others lost their homes or saw kin or friends die.

"Many are complaining of difficulty sleeping and the risks of depression and death from overwork will rise further if this goes on," the doctor said after examining some 90 Tepco workers from Saturday through Tuesday at the nearby Fukushima No. 2 plant.

Some were also worried about radiation exposure and its long-term effects on their health, he added.

Tanigawa, a professor at Ehime University School of Medicine, has been a part-time industrial physician for the two Fukushima nuclear plants since 1991.

At the end of each day, workers are decontaminated and go to the Fukushima No. 2 nuclear plant some 10 km south to sleep on the floor of a gymnasium in sleeping bags with blankets. There are tatami mats on the floor and a sheet to insulate them from the cold, he said.

Among the workers was one engaged in work around the clock without being allowed to go out at one point, he said.

The workers are also on a poor diet, centering on canned and retort-packed foods, although they can now have three meals a day, up from the initial one daily.

Workers other than senior officials work in shifts of four days on and two days off, but cannot even take a bath during the four workdays despite sweating heavily in impervious radiation-protective gear, Tanigawa said.

"Being unable to feel refreshed, they are not only vulnerable to various diseases and skin disorders but also may commit errors in their work," Tanigawa warned.

Through interviews with about 30 of them, Tanigawa found that they are heavily stressed not only as a result of the pressure of their jobs but also by being asked by family members not to go to work.

One worker whose home was lost in the disaster felt exposed to negative perceptions in a shelter where the worker spent days off, the doctor said.

“More than 80 percent of the on-site employees have their homes within a 20-km radius of the nuclear plant and some of them have lost family members,” he said, adding that concerns about their houses and lives will likely continue to distress them. “It was also stressful for some workers who were unable to confirm the safety of families for as long as a week to continue working,” he said. “On the other hand, they tend to feel indebted for working for an offending company and so cannot raise their voices.”

About 50 of the workers were diagnosed with illnesses such as high blood pressure and colds, including one worker whom he instructed Tepco to replace due to a high fever, he said.

As the crisis continues, with Tepco aiming to stabilize damaged reactors in about six to nine months under a road map released Sunday, the utility must allow workers engaged in the crisis control efforts thus far to take a rest by mobilizing all its employees and asking other power utilities to dispatch workers if its workforce is insufficient, Tanigawa said.

“Employees engaged in the dangerous work have human rights and wives and children just like others. We should not treat their lives without due respect,” he said.

Kyodo

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* <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20110421a1.html>