

Japan: Govt panel to overhaul disaster readiness plans

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A government panel has decided national disaster readiness plans need to be overhauled to strengthen preparations for major tsunami in light of the Great East Japan Earthquake that has left more than 25,000 people dead or missing.

The Central Disaster Prevention Council, chaired by Prime Minister Naoto Kan, agreed Wednesday to ask both the central and local governments to draw up specific proposals after compiling expert opinions by around autumn, council members said. The panel also intends to reassess its projections on how much damage could be caused by a huge tsunami triggered by three simultaneous ocean-trench earthquakes that experts predict will someday hit the Tokai region.

The existing disaster management plans categorize natural disasters into four types: earthquakes, damage caused by wind or floods, volcanic hazards and snow-related damage. For each category, the council has created countermeasures and emergency plans. Tsunami are addressed under earthquakes but take up just two pages of the about 400-page disaster management plan. The overhaul could place tsunami in a fifth independent category.

The Basic Law on Natural Disasters obliges concerned government bodies and local governments to work out plans to prepare for disasters based on central government measures. The council is expected to ask for additional preparations to be made.

In January 2006, the council of 26 members including ministers and experts projected that 2,700 people could be killed if an earthquake equivalent to the 1896 Meiji-Sanriku quake that killed 21,959 people struck. But the March 11 earthquake and tsunami caused damage far beyond these estimates.

At the outset of a council meeting at the Prime Minister's Office on Wednesday, Kan said: "This earthquake far surpassed the expectations and projections made by the Central Disaster Prevention Council. We need to make a drastic review of disaster countermeasures."

Also on Wednesday, the council set up a new research committee on earthquakes and tsunami.

The council currently projects a triple earthquake in the Tokai region could kill about 25,000 people. However, it will reexamine its casualty projections to take a subsequent tsunami into consideration, which could cause massive damage stretching from the Kanto region to Kyushu along the Pacific coast, the panel members said.

In last month's disaster, local government offices that were supposed to play a central role in disaster management were devastated and had no control of the situation. The council therefore plans to examine where local government offices should be built and how they could maintain their administrative functions in the event of a major disaster.

The current national guidelines do not set criteria for buildings to be used for evacuation in case of tsunami more than three meters high. To better prepare for such large tsunami, the council intends

to create specific guidelines, such as what floor people should evacuate to, the members said.

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* <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T110428005520.htm>