

Fukushima: Death of nuclear plant worker - An editorial from the Mainichi Shimbun

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Death of nuclear plant worker highlights need for proper health management

The death of a man in his 60s who was working at the waste disposal facility of the tsunami-hit Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant has raised questions about the plant operator's health management of workers struggling to bring the nuclear crisis under control.

Nearly 1,000 workers at the plant constantly face the risk of radiation exposure. Moreover, their working conditions are harsh because they are required to wear heavy protective gear. Many workers are exhausted and some have suffered heat stroke.

If workers collapse, it will only prolong the work to stabilize the nuclear power station. Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), which owns the plant, and its government regulators should do their utmost to ensure workers' safety and protect their health.

The worker, who died of a heart ailment, was rushed to the power station's clinic at around 6:50 a.m. on May 14 after complaining that he felt sick. But only one doctor works at the clinic, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and workers cannot receive treatment there while the doctor is off duty. The worker was accordingly transferred to the nuclear workers' base set up the J-Village sports facility about 20 kilometers away from the plant. Three doctors are assigned to the facility, but sufficient medical equipment is unavailable.

The medical staff performed cardiac compression on the worker, but his condition did not improve. He was then transferred to a hospital in the Fukushima Prefecture city of Iwaki, some 45 kilometers away from the plant, where he was pronounced dead. His death came just over two hours after he complained that he was ill.

The incident prompted TEPCO to approach the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry to have Kitakyushu's University of Occupational and Environmental Health, Japan dispatch doctors to the nuclear plant. The institution agreed to assign 19 doctors to the power plant from mid-May to the end of June to provide first aid treatment. Moreover, the university is set to dispatch about 80 medical practitioners to Fukushima Prefecture to conduct medical checkups on workers at the crippled plant as well as the Fukushima No. 2 Nuclear Power Plant to see if they have had internal exposure to radioactive substances.

In principle, employers are responsible for the health management of their employees, but the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry and the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry should support TEPCO's health measures for its workers until the utility has a clear outlook for bringing the crippled plant under control.

Workers have faced problems involving accommodation and meals. Some 400 workers sleep in sleeping bags on the floor of a quake-proof building and gymnasium at the No. 1 plant, and some

have complained that these places are too heavily congested for them to sleep well. The No. 2 power plant and J-Village are also used as accommodation facilities for some workers, but no shower is available. This harsh living environment has continued for more than two months.

In mid-May, TEPCO began to build pre-fabricated buildings to allow workers to sleep on beds and to take showers. The utility had initially supplied packaged heatable food to workers, but now provides them with boxed lunches and bread.

A minor error at the crippled nuclear plant could lead to a fatal accident. TEPCO must therefore do all it can to ensure that workers can fully recover from fatigue.

Grave concerns have been raised about the workers' cumulative radiation exposure. Under government standards, those handling radiation can be exposed to up to 100 millisieverts of radiation over a five-year period. As an exception, the government has raised the upper limit to 250 millisieverts for workers struggling to bring the Fukushima No. 1 complex under control. At least 30 of the workers have already been exposed to 100 millisieverts. Subcontractors are also working at the plant, and accurate dosage of radiation of some workers has reportedly not been recorded in their radiation management pocketbooks.

TEPCO and the government must not sacrifice workers' health by using the "emergency situation" as a pretext. They must do their utmost to protect the safety of the workers, whose working conditions will be even tougher in the hot summer months ahead.

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P.S.

* Mainichi, May 21, 2011:

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/perspectives/editorial/news/20110521p2a00m0na010000c.html>