

Japan: N-plant workers still labor under severe conditions

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Severe summer heat causing heatstroke and poor accommodations have plagued workers at the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, even though the government has announced that Step 1 of settling the crisis was nearly complete.

Improving worker conditions at the plant was one of the targets of Step 1. However, some employees are still not happy with their conditions.

On Tuesday, Goshi Hosono, the state minister responsible for dealing with the nuclear crisis, and Tokyo Electric Power Co., announced the near completion of Step 1.

Working conditions at the plant have improved to some extent. Worker exposure to radiation has been steadily reduced and efforts have been made to make workers more comfortable.

Currently, about 1,500 people work at the plant every day. A gymnasium at the Fukushima No. 2 nuclear power plant, about 10 kilometers from the No. 1 plant, is now equipped with showers and bunk beds for 240 people. Temporary dormitories are also under construction in the area, but problems remain.

At the special earthquake-resistant building at the No. 1 plant, housing the crisis headquarters, workers are still forced to sleep on blankets on the floor. "I can't sleep well here," a TEPCO employee said.

The summer heat has been hard on workers wearing heavy protective gear including full-face masks, as temperatures around the No. 1 plant have exceeded 30 C almost every day.

According to TEPCO, 32 workers had been diagnosed as suffering from heatstroke as of Monday. On Tuesday, a worker in his 20s suffering heatstroke symptoms was sent to the hospital. Another TEPCO worker said, "It's too hot. My cool vest [containing refrigerant] doesn't work well."

Even though air-conditioned rest stations were set up at 11 locations in the plant, workers' faces are flushed from the heat when they remove their masks, according to TEPCO sources.

As radiation-tainted debris has steadily been removed, radiation levels at the plant have decreased.

However, many subcontracting companies individually set their maximum radiation exposure levels at a range of about 20 millisieverts for employees. More and more of these workers are reaching this limit. Their subsequent departures may cause a shortage of qualified workers.

The Step 1 announcement provided some relief to heads of municipalities near the plant in Fukushima Prefecture. Many expressed their wish that Step 2, announced at the same time, would go smoothly.

Fukushima Gov. Yuhei Sato issued a statement, saying: "I understand radiation levels have been

steadily decreasing as outlined in the timetable. It means the crisis has been defused. But [they] haven't shown how they will ultimately dispose of debris. Also, compensation for victims of the crisis has not been sufficient."

Norio Kanno, the mayor of Iitate-mura, Fukushima Prefecture, which has been designated as a planned evacuation zone, said: "As the problem of [radioactive-tainted] straw is spreading, I'm concerned how much the crisis has been actually brought under control. I don't want Step 2 to be just an announcement to ease people's anxiety. I hope [the stable condition known as] cold shutdown [by entirely cooling the reactors] will be completed by whatever means necessary."

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P.S.

* <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T110720005949.htm>