

Government's policy plan on reconstruction for earthquake/tsunami-hit areas

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The government on July 29 approved a basic policy plan on reconstruction for areas devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, but the policy lacks direct mention of Prime Minister Naoto Kan's proposal for moving tsunami-vulnerable structures to higher ground.

The basic policy also does not make clear how much financial support the central government will give to affected municipal governments, as they begin to put their own reconstruction plans into effect.

Furthermore, with the administration and Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) officials battling until the last minute over how to finance the reconstruction efforts, a more specific reconstruction financing package will become the work of Kan's successor, forcing the disaster-hit areas to go ahead with their reconstruction plans without clear financial resources.

The basic policy the government approved includes the creation of "special reconstruction zones" that will get deregulation and preferential treatment, as well as subsidies that can be used flexibly. Such special zones were not established in the aftermath of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake in order to avoid having overly different treatment of disaster-hit and non-disaster hit areas.

However, the basic policy does not include direct mention of the Reconstruction Design Council's centerpiece recommendation of relocating vulnerable coastal areas to higher ground. Instead, it offers measures such as designating areas that are vulnerable to flooding and strengthening levees as to improve communities' ability to flee from tsunamis.

As part of considerations of how the government can support community relocations to safer areas, the possibility of buying tsunami-hit land from people wishing to relocate to higher ground is mentioned in the policy. However, regarding financial help to local governments for reconstruction, the policy only says the government will increase tax grants without offering details.

With it now more than four months after the March 11 quake and tsunami, there are many municipal governments that could not wait for the national government and have already started drawing up reconstruction programs that include relocations of communities to higher ground. One senior Miyagi prefectural government official expressed his concern that the government's released policy could mean that it is not earmarking funds for such relocations.

The town of Onagawa, which saw its downtown area devastated by the disasters and lost about one-tenth of its population, is scheduled to be the first municipality in the prefecture to approve a reconstruction plan, on Aug. 10. The town is projecting a cost of about 140 billion yen — over 20 times the town's 6 billion yen annual budget — to finance land development and community relocation to high ground, and it has requested financial support from the central government.

"I'm sure the idea of community relocation to high ground hasn't vanished. It's a basic question of what priority the government gives to citizen's lives," says Onagawa Mayor Nobutaka Azumi.

However, there is disagreement among those in the government. A senior Cabinet Secretariat official said, "Tsunami safety measures do not have to include community relocation to higher ground. Since we will finance reconstruction operations with taxpayer money, we should avoid excessive costs."

One senior Miyagi prefectural government official recalls, "Those of a certain ministry started saying, 'Let's think realistically,' around the time when it was said that 23 trillion yen would be needed for reconstruction over 10 years."

Although the prefecture asked for financial aid for relocations to higher ground to be included in the basic policy, that did not occur. A request by Miyagi Gov. Yoshihiro Murai for creation of a special zone with loosened regulations on fishing rights to revive the local fishing industry was granted, but after opposition from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and local fishery cooperatives, the loosened regulations were limited to corporations composed primarily of the local fishing industry.

An official of the city of Kesenuma said, "If our requests are not included in the basic policy, that makes us worried about the national government's future support." An official of Shichigahama town said, "When there is something the central government cannot do, we want them to tell us early on."

Although Prime Minister Kan vowed July 29 to revive disaster-hit areas and help restore the lives of evacuees to rebuild Japan as a vigorous nation, that pledge does little to relieve the worries of the cities, towns and villages hit hard by the disasters.

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