Japan nuke chief hints no restarts until next year

Mari Yamaguchi, The Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The head of Japan's new nuclear regulatory agency said Thursday that reactors will not be allowed to restart until they pass seismic inspections and meet new safety standards to be instituted next year.

Shunichi Tanaka, chairman of the Nuclear Regulation Authority, said that under the agency's new safety requirements, emergency procedures for accidents and terrorist attacks will become compulsory for nuclear plant operators. This follows criticism that collusion between the plant operators and authorities had left the tsunami-stricken Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant unprepared for last year's crisis. Before the accident, operators were allowed to decide for themselves whether to follow safety guidelines recommended by regulators.

Tanaka has been critical of the government's decision to restart two reactors in the western town of Ohi in July to avoid a power crunch during the high-demand summer months, calling the move political. The reactors are the only ones to go back online since Japan shut down all of its reactors for safety checks following the Fukushima disaster.

"Right now we don't have the legal basis to make any judgment over reactors," Tanaka said Thursday in an interview with The Associated Press. "We don't have the legal power to stop the Ohi reactors."

Tanaka said that his agency would draft the new requirements by March and that they would become law by July.

Nuclear power provided about a third of Japan's electricity before the March 11, 2011, accident at the Fukushima plant, and Japan had been planning to increase that to 50 percent. But last month, a Cabinet panel called for Japan to phase out nuclear power over the next three decades.

Tanaka said his five-member regulatory commission needs the new safety rules to make clear what it takes to safely restart a reactor.

The agency will also raise safety hurdles, ordering reactors shut if ongoing seismic inspections find active faults in their vicinity. Tanaka said towns around the plants must come up with expanded emergency procedures by March before any reactor is considered for resumption.

Under a guideline issued by the agency last week, communities around the plants must compile emergency measures as far as 30 kilometers (19 miles) from the plant, tripling the current requirement and affecting more than 130 municipalities and nearly 5 million people across the country.

Tanaka acknowledged that some of the densely populated areas would face difficulties compiling feasible emergency plans.

The Nos. 3 and 4 reactors at the Ohi power plant are also under scrutiny for suspected active fault lines, and the regulatory commission and independent seismologists are to inspect the ground structure underneath the reactors. The plant's operator, Kansai Electric Power Co., had failed to submit key data about possible faults, but the then-regulator, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, allowed the reactors to operate without further checks. Tanaka said the two reactors would have to be shut if the faults were confirmed.

He said Japan has faced increased seismic activity in recent years, causing temblors exceeding designed quake resistance at some plants, including Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, which is run by Fukushima operator Tokyo Electric Power Co.

The regulatory agency was inaugurated in September after a months-long delay due to demands from opposition lawmakers for more independence and criticism from some pro-nuclear agency members.

A nuclear physicist and Fukushima native, Tanaka is a former executive of the Japan Atomic Energy Agency, which promotes nuclear energy. Tanaka, 67, has helped decontaminate areas around the Fukushima plant contaminated by radiation from the melted reactors.

"We must clear questions and concerns one by one, otherwise we never regain the public trust," Tanaka said. "No reactor should operate unless the local community has emergency plans that residents can accept."

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