Japan utility agrees nuclear crisis was avoidable

Mari Yamaguchi - The Associated Press

The utility behind Japan's nuclear disaster acknowledged for the first time Friday that it could have avoided the crisis.

Tokyo Electric Power Co. said in a statement that it had known safety improvements were needed before last year's tsunami triggered three meltdowns, but it had feared the political, economic and legal consequences of implementing them.

"When looking back on the accident, the problem was that preparations were not made in advance," TEPCO's internal reform task force, led by company President Naomi Hirose, said in the statement. "Could necessary measures have been taken with previous tsunami evaluations? It was possible to take action" by adopting more extensive safety measures, the task force said.

The task force said TEPCO had feared efforts to better protect nuclear facilities from severe accidents such as tsunamis would trigger anti-nuclear sentiment, interfere with operations or increase litigation risks.

The admissions mark a major reversal for the utility, which had defended its preparedness and crisis management since the March 2011 tsunami. The disaster knocked out power to the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant, leading to the meltdowns, which forced massive evacuations and will take decades to clean up.

The statement was released after TEPCO held its first internal reform committee meeting, led by a former U.S. nuclear regulatory chief Dale Klein. His five-member committee oversees the task force's reform plans, which aim to use the lessons learned at TEPCO's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in northern Japan. The cash-strapped utility wants to restart that plant, but TEPCO officials denied the reform plans are aimed at improving public image to gain support for the plant's resumption.

Investigative reports compiled by the government and the parliament panels said collusion between the company and government regulators allowed lax supervision and allowed TEPCO to continue lagging behind in safety steps.

That company had said in its own accident probe report in June that the tsunami could not be anticipated and that the company did the best it could to bring the critically damaged plant under control, although there were shortfalls that they had to review. TEPCO bitterly criticized what it said was excessive interference from the government and the prime minister's office.

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