Nuclear - TEPCO update

The Associated Press

TOKYO, Dec. 14 (Kyodo) — Tokyo Electric Power Co. said Friday its inadequate safety culture resulted in a lack of preparation for severe nuclear accidents, as it tries to dig deeper into the root cause of the Fukushima crisis rather than just blaming the larger-than-expected tsunami for triggering the catastrophe.

Based on its revised understanding, the utility known as TEPCO unveiled the outline of a plan to revamp its oft-criticized nuclear division, including an idea to set up a regulatory organization that is inside the company but independent of the division in issuing orders for safety measures.

The outline was compiled with the involvement of a supervisory panel consisting of domestic and overseas experts, including former U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Dale Klein and former British Atomic Energy Authority Chairwoman Barbara Judge.

Klein said during a press conference at TEPCO's head office after the panel's meeting that while he believes the utility's "journey" to reform itself has just begun, he has observed some changes for the better.

"There's still a significant improvement yet to go for TEPCO to become a world-class safety-oriented company. But...we believe that positive activities are occurring," he said.

In an analysis on the root cause of the accident, TEPCO said that the assumption that safety had been secured led the company to place priority on avoiding low operational rates for nuclear reactors, which eventually resulted in a delay in implementing sufficient countermeasures against severe accidents.

To cut what the company calls the "vicious cycle" leading to insufficient preparation, the company plans to set up an internal regulatory organization, recruiting a person from outside to serve as its head, and offer training to ensure that all management personnel have a high level of safety awareness.

TEPCO has been stepping up efforts to improve its safety awareness and technical capabilities in the wake of the devastating nuclear crisis, a move viewed as laying the groundwork for the restart of its idled reactors by restoring public confidence.

Earlier in the day, Takafumi Anegawa, chief of the secretariat of TEPCO's Nuclear Reform Special Task Force, said the company had a misplaced sense of confidence that its safety measures were adequate and the risk of a severe accident was "very low."

"This fixed idea was an obstacle to improving safety in our nuclear power station,"

he said.

He also said the company "accepts completely" the description in an influential nuclear accident investigation report, released by a Diet-appointed panel in July, that its safety culture was lacking.

But he argued against a section of the report questioning whether it was appropriate to limit the direct cause of the disaster to the tsunami waves that hit the Daiichi plant following the huge earthquake on March 11, 2011.

TEPCO has maintained that key facilities at the plant withstood the impact of the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and that the ensuing tsunami flooded electrical equipment resulting in a loss of power, leading to the failure of reactor cooling systems.

The investigation report, however, said there is a possibility that the earthquake damaged equipment necessary for ensuring safety, especially small-scale pipe breaks that could have affected the safety functions of the plant.

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