Japan Sets New Safety Standard for Nuclear Plants

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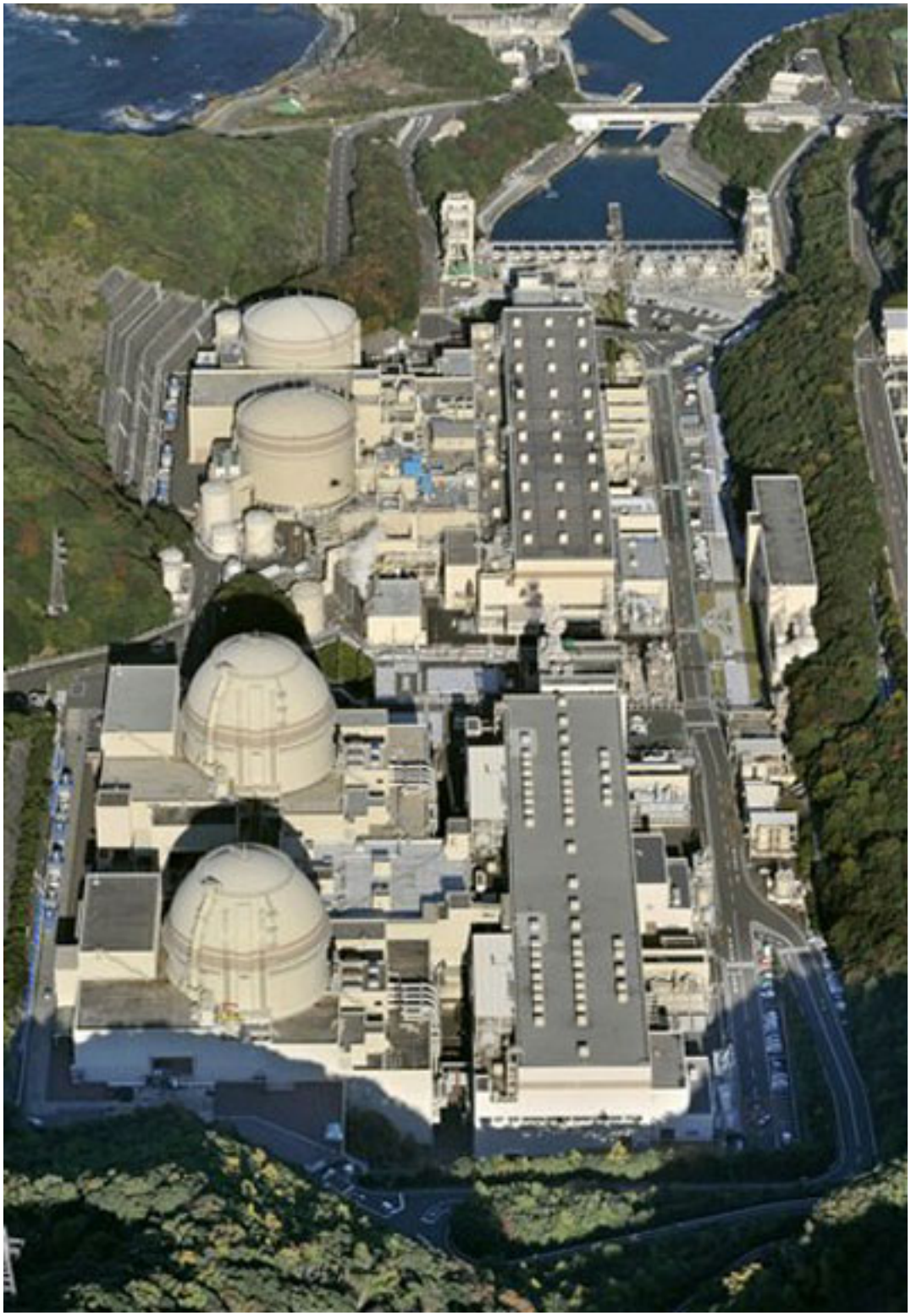

TOKYO, April 5 (Kyodo) — Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and three ministers

decided a new safety standard Friday for resuming idled nuclear reactors, featuring measures to prevent a severe accident even if reactors are hit by earthquake and tsunami comparable in magnitude to those that triggered the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

At their third meeting to consider whether to resume operation of two idled reactors at the Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture, the ministers decided to begin a process to check if the reactors meet the new standard.

Under the new standard, the government will require reactor operators to set up plans to implement, by stipulated deadlines, safety measures compiled last month by the government's nuclear safety agency. But that means it will not be required, before resuming the operation of reactors, to have completed some measures taking even years to implement.

The four ministers decided on the new standard just three days after Noda ordered the new safety standard to be established, amid remaining concerns about nuclear safety despite nuclear authorities' technical analyses through recent reactor stress tests.

Industry minister Yukio Edano said after attending the meeting that he is instructing the Oi plant operator, Kansai Electric Power Co., to present a timetable for introducing safety measures for the plant's Nos. 3 and 4 reactors.

Once the ministers judge the Oi reactors are safe enough to resume operation and if the resumption of nuclear power generation is deemed necessary due to the risk of power shortages, Edano will travel to Fukui Prefecture to seek local cooperation for reactivating those two reactors, he said.

Since last year's nuclear accident at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima Daiichi complex, triggered by a massive earthquake and tsunami, the government has required nuclear power plants to undergo two-stage stress tests and made it necessary for reactors idled for scheduled checkups to pass first-stage test before resuming operation.

Prior to the Fukushima Daiichi plant accident, nuclear power plants provided a third of Japan's electric power.

Now, however, of Japan's 54 commercial reactors, only the No. 3 unit at Hokkaido Electric Power Co.'s Tomari plant in Hokkaido is currently in operation. And that reactor is scheduled to suspend operation on May 5 for routine checks, leaving Japan without an operating reactor if no reactors resume operation by then.

Among the dozens of reactors idled for routine checks, the Oi reactors are the first that the government is considering allowing to resume operating, given the recent endorsement of the first stage stress test results on them by the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency and the Nuclear Safety Commission.

The Fukui prefectural government had called for the central government to present a provisional safety standard before reactivating the Oi reactors.

Under the new safety standard, reactors are also required to have safety measures in place to minimize damage in case of power loss following earthquakes and tsunami.

Other requirements include that the government must confirm before authorizing reactors' restart that measures have been taken to prevent the sort of situation seen at the crisis-hit Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, even if reactors are hit by comparable earthquake and tsunami.

While reactors idled for mandatory periodic checks are subject to the first-stage test, all reactors in Japan need to take the more comprehensive second-stage test. Nuclear power plant operators were originally required to submit results on the second-stage test by the end of last year, but none have done so yet.

Nuclear disaster minister Goshi Hosono and Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura also attended the meeting with Noda and Edano.

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