Crisis Plans Lag Even as Japan's Reactors Restart

MARI YAMAGUCHI, Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — If the Ohi nuclear reactors plunged into a Fukushima-style meltdown, the only route for escaping or for sending help would be a winding, cliff-hugging road often closed by snow in winter or clogged by beachgoers in summer.

Radioactivity from such an accident at the plant in western Japan could contaminate the country's biggest freshwater source, Lake Biwa, which serves more than 14 million people.

Still, Japan's government has chosen to lift its post-Fukushima nuclear freeze and restart two reactors at Ohi, even though construction of an alternative route to the facility is barely on the drawing board and despite the lack of any firm contingency plans for the water source.

The government is pushing hard to get some reactors back online before energy-hungry summer months, despite much public opposition. It says the nuclear industry has done more than enough during the shutdown to guard against meltdown risks — even in the case of quakes and tsunamis like the ones that struck Fukushima — and that crisis contingency plans are being revamped nationwide.

But some of the communities around the Ohi plant don't feel ready for the startup — especially given the government's own new guidelines to expand evacuation zones around reactors from the current 10-kilometer (6-mile) radius to 30 kilometers (18 miles).

And they're not the only ones.

Most of the communities around the country's 48 other reactors would not yet comply with new zone, according to local and central government officials and nuclear regulators interviewed by The Associated Press.

"If another crisis hits now, we can't do anything but flee," said Kaoru Tsuchiya, a crisis management official in Shiga province in western Japan, parts of which fall within the new evacuation zone around the Ohi plants. "We feel so insecure."

The new guidelines raise Japan's nuclear emergency plans to international standards. But more than a year after the Fukushima crisis, many of the towns still lack safe evacuation routes, radiation monitoring equipment or medicine in case of exposure, leaving millions of residents without adequate protection.

The new criteria, released by nuclear officials in March as a benchmark for coming revisions to national and local master plans, would involve 135 towns in 21 prefectures around the country, affecting nearly 5 million people, according to the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, or NISA.

Currently, 45 of those towns comply with the old contingency plan guidelines. Few, if any, comply with the new ones.

NISA disaster management official Hisatoshi Nakazaki said most of the towns are lagging because they are waiting to see a national disaster plan due later this summer. Local communities must compile their own plans within six months after that.

But in the meantime, they must make do with whatever preparations they already have made.

"In an emergency, they have to use the old evacuation plans, think quickly and use discretion," Nakazaki said.

The government decided last weekend to restart the Ohi reactors. It said they have passed safety checks and noted they are especially important because they generate electricity for a region that has traditionally been heavily reliant on nuclear power.

The Ohi reactors are being prepared now for restarting in July. Reactors at Ikata in southwestern Japan and Tomari on the northern island of Hokkaido are seen as next in line for resumption.

Public opposition to resuming operations remains high, however, because of the March 2011 crisis at Fukushima Dai-ichi plant that turned into the world's worst atomic disaster since Chernobyl and because of lingering distrust of an industry widely seen as opaque.

Critics note that, in addition to the required safety checks, Japan should also mandate full reviews of crisis contingency plans before allowing any plants to operate, which would bring it more in line with rules in Europe and the United States.

The two Ohi reactors sit on Wakasa Bay, a region known as Japan's "nuclear alley" and home to a total of 13 commercial reactors. Some of the crucial measures designed to protect residents in case of crisis at Ohi won't be ready immediately — a raised seawall next year and an onsite command center by March 2016.

Filtered vents, which could reduce radiation leaks to the environment, won't be ready for three more years.

The Fukui provincial government started land surveys only this month for the multibillion-dollar project to repair the sole route to the Ohi nuclear plant, which sits at the tip of a peninsula, and to add a new alternate evacuation road. Heavy snowfalls and summer beach traffic often clog the existing, 740-meter (810-yard) access road.

Gov. Yukuko Kada of neighboring Shiga province accuses Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of emphasizing plant site safety to the exclusion of any discussion of safety procedures in the communities surrounding the plants.

"They still ignore the residents, and that's what angers me most," said Kada, an environmental scientist and independent politician.

Kada said Noda's government has refused to provide radiation simulation data that she has requested to compile an evacuation map and study the impact of radiation on Lake Biwa, where monitoring stations still need to be installed.

"I'm horrified by a thought that another Fukushima-class crisis could instantly make the lake water undrinkable," she said.

The neighboring city of Kyoto — Japan's biggest tourist destination — has only a tentative crisis plan, and its first-ever drill is still three months away, city disaster

manager Fujio Yoshida said. Its contingency plans need to take into account a large number of foreign visitors, he said.

"Until Fukushima, we never imagined radiation reaching our city, or the need for crisis plans," he said.

The central government has earmarked $105 million to do feasibility studies, upgrade crisis management centers and take other steps to adapt to the new 30-kilometer (18-mile) guidelines.

The idea of expanding the evacuation zones is not new to Japan. A 2006 effort to match the 30-kilometer (18-mile) zone recommended by the International Atomic Energy Agency, was blocked by NISA officials who said it would "trigger confusion and escalate public fear over nuclear safety."

If it had been in place, it could have helped at least some of the 87,000 residents inside a restricted area around the Fukushima plant to evacuate more quickly and safely, officials have said. Within days of the disaster, residents within 20 kilometers (12 miles) of the plant had to be evacuated. Those living outside 10 kilometers (6 miles) had received no training.

In Ehime, home to three reactors at the Ikata nuclear plant in southwestern Japan, officials are tackling their update of evacuation plans.

"We need a manual. We have to consider a much larger area than before," said prefectural crisis planning official Noriyuki Onishi. "We have to get started. We can't just wait and worry."

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