US scientists find lessons from Japan nuke crisis

MARI YAMAGUCHI - Associated Press - Associated Press

A group of American scientists met in Tokyo on Tuesday to study last year's Fukushima nuclear accident in hopes of finding lessons to improve the safety of U.S. atomic power reactors.

Norman Neureiter, head of the 22-member committee of the National Academy of Sciences, said the tsunami-spawned disaster at Fukushima nuclear power plant and its continuing impact have caused widespread concerns about the safety of nuclear energy.

"We are trying to look at the whole experience and to take from that lessons which can be applied to increasing safety of nuclear power," he told The Associated Press during a coffee break between technical sessions.

Neureiter said the committee is hearing from Japanese officials and will conduct its own investigation. He said the findings would be valuable to the nuclear industry throughout the world.

A tsunami generated by a powerful earthquake hit the Fukushima nuclear plant in March 2011, knocking out power and cooling systems and causing partial meltdowns in three reactors. More than 100,000 people evacuated from the area are still unable to return to their homes in Fukushima due to radiation concerns. The magnitude-9.0 earthquake and ensuing tsunami also left more than 19,000 people dead or missing on Japan's northeastern coast, but no death linked to radiation has been reported.

"Because after a thing like this in Japan and a damage and human losses and continuing radiation and all of these things, people will have more and more questions about nuclear energy. So, to draw the conclusion from this investigation hopefully useful lessons which can be applied to elsewhere to make sure nothing like this happens again."

During the three-day meeting that began Monday, the group conducted hearings from experts who led Japanese investigations, as well as regulators and officials from the Tokyo Electric Power Co., which runs the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant, to gather information independently and discuss technical details. The group was also to visit Fukushima for a plant visit after wrapping up a Tokyo leg Wednesday.

Neureiter said collusion between the industry and the regulators, a cozy relationship known as "the nuclear village" has caused deep-rooted distrust among the public. Japanese investigations have also blamed the lack of safety culture for contributing to the crisis.

During Tuesday's hearing, Toyoshi Fuketa, a Nuclear Regulation Authority commissioner, acknowledged the need to study ways to improve safety culture, but his organization is too busy setting up new safety and radiological protection standards and other framework.

"We have to study safety culture, but frankly speaking at the moment we do not have enough resources, enough time, or enough personnel," he said.

The group will compile a report to be released in April 2014.

He said the group is still in "an investigative stage" and the process will go on for a long time.

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