Nuke Plant Utility: Some Safety Measures Neglected

MARI YAMAGUCHI,Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The operator of the disaster-struck Japanese nuclear power plant has acknowledged that the company long neglected safety measures intended to avoid and manage severe accidents while it was obsessed with fixing minor safety problems to improve operational records.

Tokyo Electric Power Co. is struggling to reform itself, and earlier this year launched an internal reform task force, led by company president Naomi Hirose, to find out what caused the disasters and compile improvement plans.

Last year's powerful earthquake and tsunami caused multiple meltdowns and massive radiation leaks at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant. TEPCO continues efforts to keep the plant stable until it's decommissioned, a process expected to take decades.

The task force said Friday that TEPCO just didn't think disasters beyond their anticipation would occur, and failed to follow international standards and recommendations that could have mitigated the impact of the accident. The utility could have done more to back up its power and cooling systems, was short on emergency equipment such as fire engines and had treated crisis management drills as a formality, the group said.

At the same time, TEPCO focused on small safety concerns to avoid minor troubles that could have triggered inspections or reactor stoppages, the task force said.

"The risk for the company used to mean a decline in operational records. We need them to change that mentality and make safety the top priority and take that to their heart," said committee member Masafumi Sakurai, who had earlier served on a Parliament-commissioned accident investigation panel. "And we would like to see the top management take initiative."

The task force said TEPCO employees also lacked crisis management skills and the company lacked equipment needed in case of crisis.

The task force introduced plans to nurture a company-wide safety culture through various programs, including safety measure contests among employees and performance evaluations of middle management based on their safety efforts.

The plans were submitted Friday to the overseeing independent committee, led by former U.S. nuclear regulatory chief Dale Klein and four other outside experts, including Sakurai.

Klein said it was difficult at first to obtain information that was accurate and transparent from TEPCO. His committee also was concerned about TEPCO's lack of apology for the disaster, but he added that the utility is changing.

"Clearly they were not taking responsibility for the accident initially, and that has now changed," he said. He added, however, that he still thinks TEPCO is underestimating how difficult it would be to transform.

The reform plans apparently aim to use Fukushima's lessons at TEPCO's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in northern Japan. The cash-strapped utility wants to restart that plant.

TEPCO was bitterly criticized for allegedly covering up or holding key information about meltdowns and radiation data.

Various investigative reports, including one commissioned by Parliament, blamed collusion between the regulators and the operator for a lack of safety culture, as well as for the lax supervision that allowed TEPCO to continue lagging behind in safety steps. The Parliament investigation called the accident "man-made."

U.S. nuclear regulatory chief Allison Macfarlane told the Associated Press on Friday that Fukushima's disaster highlighted the importance of a strong nuclear watchdog.

"In general, one of the important takeaways from the Fukushima accident is the importance of a strong, independent regulator that operates transparently and is well-funded and has the backing of the government," said Macfarlane, who is in Japan to attend this weekend's international conference on nuclear safety in Fukushima.

Until recently, Japan lacked an independent regulatory system. The regulator at the time of the accident was part of the industry ministry that promotes nuclear energy.

A more powerful and independent unit, the Nuclear Regulation Authority, launched in September. It is currently upgrading safety standards and evacuation guidelines.

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