More Agencies To Get Involved With Fukushima Monitoring

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The head of the U.N. nuclear agency urged Japan to work harder to address international concerns about leaks of contaminated water at its crippled Fukushima nuclear plant, and said his agency will jointly monitor radiation levels in the nearby ocean. International Atomic Energy Agency chief Yukiya Amano told Japan's top nuclear regulator that it is crucial that the country share data with the international community about the safety of Japanese waters and marine life. South Korea recently imposed a ban on fish from the area.

Japanese officials acknowledged in July that the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant has been leaking radioactive water into the Pacific Ocean since soon after its March 2011 meltdowns. Repeated leaks of contaminated water from storage tanks at the plant have added to the international concerns. "Ocean monitoring is extremely important, and the IAEA would very much like to provide as much support as possible," Amano told Nuclear Regulation Authority Chairman Shinichi Tanaka at the start of the talks. Monitoring methods and other details will be discussed when a team of IAEA experts visits Japan next month, officials said.

Tanaka said he hopes the joint monitoring will address concerns among Japan's neighbors and include experts from those countries. Last month, South Korea banned all fish imports from Fukushima and seven other prefectures along Japan's northeastern coast, citing growing public worry over radioactive water leaks and insufficient information from Tokyo about the measures it has taken. Fisheries in Fukushima are nearly all closed, and fish caught in nearby prefectures sold on the Japanese market are all tested to ensure they are safe for consumption. Japan insists that radioactivity in seawater samples from the area has remained below detectable levels.

The plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., has come under fire over a spate of recent leaks and mishaps that have renewed doubts over its ability to handle the crisis. Experts have faulted TEPCO over delayed disclosures, human error and inadequate skills in measuring radioactivity, saying they have hurt the credibility of Japanese data. Following criticism of its perceived reluctance to accept foreign expertise, Japan's government is stepping up efforts to allow international help. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Sunday that Japan is open to foreign expertise in tackling the contaminated water problems at the plant.

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