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IAEA Probes Accident in Japan

By MITSURU OBE

TOKYO—A team of experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency began its investigation into the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident on Tuesday, amid allegations that slow decision making by plant operators and regulators may have exacerbated what has become the world's worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.



The operator of Japan's crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant confirms meltdown in a total of three reactors soon after the March 11 quake. Video courtesy of Reuters.

The 18-member team, which is made up of six IAEA officials and 12 experts from various countries, will hold hearings with Japanese regulators and plant operator [Tokyo Electric Power Co.](#) to investigate the accident triggered by the March 11 magnitude-9 earthquake and ensuing tsunami.

The team, led by Michael Weightman, chief nuclear inspector of Britain, includes experts from the U.S., China, Russia and South Korea. The mission's purpose is "to learn lessons so we can improve nuclear safety...and nuclear trust around the world," Mr. Weightman said to reporters.

The investigation comes as opposition politicians say Prime Minister Naoto Kan's office appeared to have meddled in the recovery operation. At issue are apparent conflicts between Tepco and authorities over whether the prime minister's office ordered the operator to stop injecting seawater into overheating reactors amid safety concerns, a contention Mr. Kan has denied.

In its 10-day trip, the team is scheduled to visit the Fukushima Daiichi plant and the nearby Daini plant, which avoided any major problems in safely shutting down its four reactors.

The IAEA regularly provides technical assistance and advice to member states, but only at the invitation of the host nation. Following a July 16, 2007, major earthquake that shook the Kashiwazaki Kariwa nuclear-power plant, three similar IAEA-led teams of international experts found the world's largest nuclear facility wasn't built to withstand a major earthquake. But the teams praised the plant's technology, which prevented a major accident. The findings were published in three IAEA reports that were reviewed by [The Wall Street Journal](#).

IAEA spokesmen have declined to comment on details of the 2007 report and didn't respond to requests to comment on the latest mission.

One question facing the team is whether the Daiichi disaster was caused by the damage done to vital cooling systems by the 14-meter high tsunami—as Tepco and government regulators suggest—or whether the quake itself damaged reactor vessels, allowing cooling water to leak out.



Reuters

Mike Weightman, chief nuclear inspector of Britain, speaks to the press in Tokyo on Tuesday.

Tepco released an analysis Tuesday suggesting the damage was due to the tsunami.

"No change was detected in the temperatures or the pressure levels of the reactors in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake," said Junichi Matsumoto, a Tepco spokesman. Neither were there any data indicating that ruptures or leaks occurred at any of the plant's six reactors after the quake, he added.

"It is the loss of power and water supply in an ensuing tsunami that caused an overheating of the reactors," he said.

Mr. Matsumoto also said the analysis confirmed that fuel rods in the plant's No. 2 and No. 3 units severe overheated, leading to meltdowns that were substantial but less critical than the one in the No. 1 unit.

Tepco previously said unit No. 1's reactor core had completely melted and fallen to the bottom of the pressure vessel that houses the reactor core.

Mr. Matsumoto said an emergency cooling system kicked in at Nos. 2 and 3, allowing them to cool the reactors when they were hottest. But the system stopped after a couple of days, resulting in the eventual melting of the cores at those units as well. He said the damage occurred March 13 at Reactor No. 3 and a day later at Reactor No. 2.

Tepco later took the unusual step of filling the reactors with seawater, avoiding a far worse scenario of an overheating reactor melting through the containment structures and releasing large amounts of radiation.

According to the analysis, an emergency cooling system at unit No. 2 came to a halt at 1:25 p.m. March 14. Tepco began injecting seawater into the reactor that evening, but that didn't stop damage from being done to the reactor core, which may have mostly melted away by the evening of March 15.

At unit No. 3, all alternative cooling systems became unavailable by 2:42 a.m. March 13. Injection of fresh water began as the core began melting around 9 a.m. that day. By the early hours of March 14, much of the core may have fallen to the bottom of the reactor, Tepco said.

The IAEA team's initial findings will be shared with the Japanese government and later presented to a special cabinet-level meeting of the atomic agency, to be held next month as part of an effort to promote the safety of nuclear development among member countries.

—David Crawford contributed to this article.

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