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Absorbent used to soak up radioactive water, 2 found dead at nuke plant

TOKYO, April 3, Kyodo

Workers prepared Sunday to block the leakage of highly radioactive water into the sea from the crisis-hit Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant by injecting polymeric powder that can absorb 50 times its volume of water, the government's nuclear safety agency said.

The plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. said the same day that two workers in their 20s who had been missing since the March 11 killer quake and tsunami that crippled the power station were found dead in the basement of a reactor's building last Wednesday.

They died of bleeding from multiple injuries about an hour after the quake struck the plant, according to the utility known as TEPCO. It is the first time that TEPCO workers have been confirmed to have died at the Daiichi plant.

Engineers will inject the polymeric water absorbent used for diapers later in the day into pipes leading to a pit connected to the No. 2 reactor's building where a 20-centimeter crack has been found to be leaking radioactive water.

The Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency said the water is still flowing from the pit into the Pacific Ocean and that the rate of the leak remains unchanged despite TEPCO's efforts on Saturday to encase the fracture in concrete.

Highly radioactive water has been filling up the basement of the No. 2 building and a tunnel-like underground trench connected to it. The water in the pit is believed to have come from the No. 2 reactor core, where fuel rods have partially melted.

Hidehiko Nishiyama, a spokesman for the nuclear regulatory body, said the operator has confirmed that pits from the plant's other reactors have no similar cracks.

Workers have also been checking the condition of the embankment at the plant on the coast to find out other possible routes for radiation leakage into the sea, the agency added.

TEPCO has revealed that radioactive iodine-131 more than 10,000 times the legal concentration limit was detected in the water found in the pit.

Levels of radioactive materials have been skyrocketing in the sea near the nuclear power plant, fanning concerns about the expansion of sea contamination and the impact on fishery products.

A seawater sample collected Wednesday afternoon near the plant had iodine-131 at a concentration 4,385 times the maximum level legally permitted.

But TEPCO has since been unable to release the latest monitoring data on the sea, with a programming error damaging the credibility of its analysis to some extent, and is bolstering efforts to raise the accuracy, according to the agency.

In addition to efforts to block the radiation-contaminated water leakage, technicians continued operations Sunday to secure enough space at tanks to remove radioactive water that has been soaking the basement of the plant's Nos. 1-3 reactors. The stagnant water has been obstructing work to restore the vital cooling functions at the reactors.

Later in the day, engineers will also connect pumps used to inject fresh water into the troubled reactors to an external power source, switching from emergency diesel generators, to stably pour in the coolant water, according to the agency.

Nishiyama said TEPCO will inject nitrogen into the containment vessel of the No. 1 reactor on Tuesday or later to help prevent the risk of more hydrogen explosions caused by overheating of the reactor.

Once the mission to block the radiation leakage by the absorbent is completed, TEPCO will try to move the radioactive water in the pit to storage facilities to be prepared at the plant, he said.

To store the tainted water, the utility is considering using a large artificial floating island, called a "megafloat," and U.S. Navy barges that originally carried fresh coolant water for injection into the reactors, Nishiyama said.

The company has been pouring massive amounts of water into the reactors and their spent nuclear fuel pools as a stopgap measure to cool them down, because serious damage to the fuel rods from overheating could lead to the release of enormous amounts of radioactive materials into the environment.

However, the measure is believed to be linked to the possible leak of contaminated water from the reactors, where fuel rods have partially melted.

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