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Fukushima

Former Tepco bosses charged over Fukushima meltdown

First criminal action to be taken after 2011 disaster, in which three nuclear reactors went into meltdown after earthquake



Former Tepco executives Tsunehisa Katsumata, Ichiro Takekuro and Sakae Muto. Photograph: Reuters

Three former executives from Tokyo Electric Power (Tepco) have been charged with contributing to deaths and injuries stemming from the triple meltdown in 2011 at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Their indictment on Monday marks the start of the first criminal action to be taken in connection with the disaster, which forced the evacuation of 160,000 residents, many of whom are still unable to return to their homes.

Tsunehisa Katsumata, who was Tepco's chairman at the time, has been charged with professional negligence resulting in death, along with two former vice-presidents, Sakae Muto and Ichiro Takekuro.

The men, who have not been taken into custody, allegedly failed to take measures to defend Fukushima Daiichi, despite being aware of the risk from a tsunami.

Three of the plant's six reactors went into meltdown after a magnitude-9 earthquake triggered a tsunami along the north-east coast of Japan on 11 March 2011. The waves flooded the facility's back-up power supply and crippled the reactors' cooling systems, causing massive radiation leaks.

Experts say prosecutors could struggle to prove criminal responsibility for failing to prevent the meltdown. The trial, which is not expected to begin until next year, could reveal information about the disaster that Tepco has yet to make public.

Japan's public broadcaster, NHK, said the three former executives would plead not guilty to the charges and argue that it was impossible to predict the size of the tsunami.

An independent judicial panel of citizens ruled last July that the men should go on trial, after public prosecutors had twice decided not to pursue the case.

The 11-member panel, which has the power to compel prosecutors to act, said Katsumata, 75, Muto, 65, and Takekuro, 69, should be held criminally responsible for the deaths of 44 elderly hospital patients during and soon after the evacuation, and injuries to Tepco staff and members of the self-defence forces.

Campaigners called the indictments "a major step", and called on Japan to abandon nuclear power.

"The people of Fukushima and Japan deserve justice," said Hisayo Takada of Greenpeace Japan. "The court proceedings that will now follow should reveal the true extent of Tepco's and the Japanese regulatory system's enormous failure to protect the people of Japan."

"Tepco and the Japanese regulator continue to ignore demands to disclose key details of what they know about the causes of the accident. The 100,000 people who still can't return home deserve to have all the facts."

Of the country's 43 working reactors, four have been restarted since last year, while the remainder are undergoing repairs and checks under stricter post-Fukushima safety regulations.

Reports by the government and MPs have been strongly critical of the safety culture at Tepco, and of lax oversight by the government and regulators.

Last year, the International Atomic Energy Agency pointed to a misguided faith in the safety of nuclear power as a key factor in the Fukushima accident. A 2012 parliamentary report said Fukushima was a "manmade disaster" caused by poor regulation and collusion between the government, Tepco and the industry's watchdog.

Tepco has insisted it was impossible to anticipate a tsunami of the size that struck the plant almost five years ago. The judicial panel said, however, that the executives ignored a 2008 internal report predicting that the plant could be struck by tsunami as high as 15.7 metres, adding that they had "failed to take pre-emptive measures, knowing the risk of a major tsunami".

Only last week, the utility admitted it had failed to announce that meltdowns had occurred in three Fukushima Daiichi reactors until two months after the accident.

Tepco said it had been unaware of a company emergency manual that defined a meltdown as damage to more than 5% of the fuel inside a reactor. For weeks, the firm said the reactors had sustained less serious "core damage".

The nuclear and industrial safety agency, the industry watchdog at the time, also refused to describe the accident as a meltdown.

Tepco only started using the word meltdown May 2011, after a computer simulation showed fuel in one reactor had almost entirely melted and fallen to the bottom of the primary containment chamber, and that two other reactor cores had melted significantly.

The firm conceded its initial wording had been misleading, but insisted it had responded appropriately.

"Core damage or meltdown, it didn't make any difference in how we responded to the emergency, which was to cool the cores no matter what," said Tepco spokesman Shinichi Nakakuki.

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