

Kepeco admits negligence, not fault, in fatal reactor pipe blast

This is a non-nuclear industrial accident but it points to KEPCO management lapses.

The Japan Times
March 3, 2005

Kansai Electric Power Co. admitted it failed to inspect a secondary cooling pipe that ruptured in August, killing five workers at its Mihama Nuclear Power Plant, in a report released by the utility Tuesday.

But the report stops short of saying Kepeco was responsible for the accident in Fukui Prefecture, simply saying that poor communications between subcontractors and Kepeco employees was a contributing cause.

The five who were scalded to death and the six who were injured as a result of the Aug. 9 accident at the No. 3 reactor were employees of Nihon Arm Co., a Kepeco subsidiary.

The report says Nihon Arm and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd., which were in charge of inspecting secondary cooling pipes at the reactor, submitted to Kepeco a checklist of items to be inspected. But for reasons that remain unclear, 42 items were omitted.

These omissions included the pipe that ruptured. It was later revealed the pipe had never been inspected since the reactor started up in 1976.

"The list could have been revised" to include the omissions, Kepeco President Yosaku Fujii told a news conference Tuesday evening. "The accident was the result of human negligence."

Kepeco's report was submitted to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, which is compiling its own report on the accident, the day it was released.

Since the accident, Fujii has faced calls to resign, but he said Tuesday he would wait until after the agency's report is released later this month before making any decisions.

However, Kepeco sources said that if the agency judges Kepeco harshly, Fujii would probably be forced to resign.

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries also apologized for the omission of the 42 items from the inspection list, but stopped short of taking responsibility for the accident, saying it would also wait for the agency's final report.

Antinuclear activists said Kepeco's report was vague about the utility's role in the accident.

"My impression is that the question of who was ultimately responsible for the accident and the negligence that led to the accident, was not clearly addressed," said Hideyuki Koyama, a spokesman for Osaka-based Mihama no Kai.

Nor were Mihama officials satisfied with the report.

"It's true there are concerns the report is too vague on Kepeco's responsibility," said Hiroaki Hikose of the town office. "There are also concerns about ensuring such an

accident does not happen again, which have to be addressed not just by Kepco but also by Mihama, the prefecture, and, ultimately, the central government."