

Japanese power company hid accident at nuclear plant

Scare mongers have to go back 8 years to find something to publish. That demonstrates the reliability of today's nuclear industry.

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TOKYO – Hokuriku Electric Power Co., known as Hokurikuden, failed to report a criticality accident in 1999 at its nuclear power plant in Shikamachi, Ishikawa Prefecture, in which there was an uncontrollable chain reaction for 15 minutes, the government and the power company said Thursday.

On June 18, 1999, three of the 89 control rods inserted from underneath into the reactor core suddenly slipped out during a regular checkup at Shika Nuclear Power Station, causing the reactor to reactivate.

The reactor was not automatically stopped and the chain reaction lasted for 15 minutes. But the company did not sufficiently inspect the cause, and failed to keep records of the accident or report it to the government.

The Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) of the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry regarded the incident as critical and considers the failure to report a violation of the Nuclear Reactor Regulation Law.

Later Thursday, NISA ordered the company to confirm the reactor's safety, suspending its operation, if necessary.

The incident started at 2:17 a.m. on June 18, 1999, when workers were closing water pressure valves so they could move 88 control rods to confirm whether another rod could be inserted quickly.

Due to an operating error, three of the control rods suddenly slipped out of the reactor.

The reactor's control system detected the start of criticality – a nuclear fission chain reaction – and sent signals for an emergency stop, but the three control rods could not be immediately reinserted.

The reinsertion was made difficult because the necessary numbers of nitrogen gas tanks – used to pressure the rods into place in the reactor – had not been prepared.

The critical condition lasted for the 15 minutes it took the workers to finish reinserting the three control rods by adjusting the valves.

Though the energy output during the accident was less than 1 percent of the rated figure, the reactor was effectively uncontrollable for the entire time.

In addition, the covers of the reactor pressure vessel and the containment vessel had been removed for maintenance, thereby lowering the reactor's ability to contain radiation.

Nobody was exposed to radiation, however, because there were no workers near the reactor in the building at the time of the accident.

As the reactor had been reactivated and became critical in an unpredicted way, NISA concluded the incident was serious and had been unforeseen, and therefore qualified as a criticality accident.

The accident was discovered during an internal investigation following recent scandals over nuclear power plants falsifying data.

Shika Nuclear Power Station's Unit No. 1 Reactor began operation in July 1993. A boiling-water reactor, it has an energy output capacity of 540,000 kilowatts.

The reactor has emergency equipment that pours boric acid solution, which can stop nuclear fission, into the reactor core when control rods cannot be inserted. But during the accident, the equipment was not used.