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Fukushima operator admits nuclear disaster avoidable

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TOKYO | Fri Oct 12, 2012 11:09am EDT

Oct 12 (Reuters) - Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco), the operator of the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant, said on Friday it could have dealt better with the plant's meltdowns if broad preparations were taken, reversing the previous management's view that the disaster was unavoidable due to an unexpected force of nature.

The comments were contained in a draft plan for the reform of nuclear power organisation a Tepco task force submitted to an independent advisory body, which held the first meeting on Friday, to improve safety and safety culture at Tepco.

The five-member advisory body to the board of directors, the Nuclear Reform Monitoring Committee, plans to hold a meeting once every two to three months to review the draft plan and make proposals, without a pre-fixed time to complete its mission.

The Fukushima Daiichi plant, 240 km (150 miles) north of Tokyo, was hit on March 11 last year by a massive earthquake and tsunami that swamped its backup power and cooling systems, resulting in meltdowns of three of its six reactors.

About 150,000 people were forced to flee as radioactive materials spewed,

Tepco, struggling under huge costs for compensation, cleanup and decommissioning, has since replaced top management with Chairman Kazuhiko Shimokobe, a lawyer who had crafted a compensation scheme for disaster victims, and President Naomi Hirose.

"When looking back on the accident, the problem was that preparations were not made in advance, so we need a reform plan that will allow us to be sensitive in capturing opportunities for improvement and safety enhancement and lead to actual measures," the draft nuclear reform plan said.

It was possible to take action in regard of tsunami defence based on the company's earlier tsunami evaluations and it was also possible to diversify safety systems by referencing severe accident measures taken in other countries, the draft also said.

In a news conference attended by the committee members, Dale Klein, head of the committee and former chairman of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said nuclear power can be safe in any country - even in quake-prone Japan - if done properly.

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Tepco was nationalised earlier this year with a 1 trillion yen (\$12.7 billion) injection of public funds in exchange for a turnaround plan, that includes restarting the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant, northwest of Tokyo, as early as in April 2013. (\$1 = 78.5100 Japanese yen) (Reporting by Risa Maeda)

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