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Japan unveils strict nuclear measures

By Jonathan Soble in Tokyo

Japanese nuclear regulators unveiled strict new safety measures on Monday to protect atomic facilities against natural disasters and terrorist attacks, in what is shaping up to be the biggest overhaul of mandatory industry standards since the Fukushima accident in 2011.

The draft rules, which are to be finalised in July, are likely to present electric utilities with fresh hurdles to clear before they can restart nuclear plants that have been idled since the meltdowns at Fukushima Daiichi power station nearly two years ago. Currently, all but two of Japan's 50 surviving reactors are closed because of safety concerns.

Some of the proposed measures, such as the use of mobile back-up electrical generators, have already been implemented by nuclear operators, but others would require new and expensive upgrades.

They include a requirement to outfit plants with back-up control rooms away from reactor buildings, install new pressure vents capable of filtering out radioactive gasses, and reinforce protective structures to withstand the impact of a jet airliner should one be used in a terrorist attack.

The rules would put a new government safety agency created in September, the Nuclear Regulation Authority, in charge of areas where electric utilities had previously had wide latitude to devise their own procedures. Power company executives complain that some of the measures, such as special exhaust systems for hydrogen, the cause of explosions at Fukushima, go beyond international norms.

Shunichi Tanaka, the agency's head, says the new rules represent "the beginning of real [nuclear] regulation in Japan" and has said no idled plants will be reviewed for possible restart until the new rules come into effect. He is also pushing for a more cautious evaluation of earthquake faults under atomic facilities, an effort that has already ensnared several plants that may now have to be permanently decommissioned.

The new assertiveness from regulators, long seen in Japan as reflexively supportive of the nuclear industry, could create tensions with the conservative government of Shinzo Abe, prime minister, which was elected in December after a campaign in which it promised to slow or

reverse the country's shift away from atomic power since Fukushima.

The previous government had committed Japan to phasing out nuclear power by the end of the 2030s, but since taking office Mr Abe has talked of approving the construction of new state-of-the-art reactors that he says would be better able to withstand earthquakes and tsunamis like the one that touched off the Fukushima disaster.

The Nuclear Regulation Authority is expected to give utilities three to five years to upgrade facilities to meet the new requirements, and it remains unclear whether any plants will be allowed to restart before all their upgrades are completed. Even if the agency permits restarts during the implementation period, local governments could object.

Utilities are already bracing for significant costs related to the new requirements. Kansai Electric Power, the country's second-largest electricity company, said last week it expected to spend Y65bn a year over the next three years on nuclear safety measures, about twice the amount it spent before Fukushima. Kyushu Electric, another utility, is budgeting for a similar jump to Y43bn a year.

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