Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Banri Kaieda apologized Tuesday over reports that he threatened to "punish" firefighters if they didn't carry out an operation to spray water into the No. 3 reactor building at the Fukushima No. 1 plant.

Kaieda refrained from admitting whether he actually made the threat, but he told a news conference that "if my remarks offended firefighters . . . I would like to apologize on that point."

The move came after Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara lodged a protest Monday with Prime Minister Naoto Kan over the "forcing" of Tokyo Fire Department members dispatched to the nuclear plant to engage in an hours-long water-spraying mission and referring to "punishment" if they refused the task.

According to Ishihara, Kan apologized. Ishihara said he didn't know who actually made the threat, but sources close to the metropolitan government said it was Kaieda.

Ishihara also said that equipment broke down because of the continuous mission, which involved spraying water toward the No. 3 reactor building for 13 hours at a time.

Kaieda serves as deputy head of the nuclear disaster task force jointly set up by the government and Tokyo Electric Power Co. The task force is headed by Kan. Kaieda said a liaison staffer mediated the communication between him and the firefighters.

The dousing mission can now be carried out for lengthy periods basically unattended through the use of vehicles capable of shooting a large amount of water toward the reactor from a height of 22 meters.

The mission in the highly contaminated plant area is considered essential to cooling down a pool in the No. 3 reactor building storing spent nuclear fuel, feared to have been boiling.

The pool is located inside the building, but water can be shot from outside because the building suffered damage from an apparent hydrogen explosion.

If fuel is no longer fully covered by water, which evaporates in the high heat of the fuel rods, it can create the risk of radioactive release. The No. 3 reactor's spent fuel included the extremely dangerous MOX.

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