

Most Fukushima nuke plant workers ineligible for free cancer checks

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By MIKI AOKI/ Staff Writer

Of the many thousands of workers who have risked radiation exposure at the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, only a paltry 3.7 percent are eligible for free cancer screenings provided by the government and Tokyo Electric Power Co.

The percentage represents 904 people among 24,118 who have worked at the facility since the onset of the disaster in March 2011 to September this year.

The low rate is because the government and plant operator TEPCO limited the scope of free screenings to those who were exposed to radiation of more than 50 millisieverts between March 11, 2011, and mid-December 2011, when the central government announced that reactor meltdowns triggered by the magnitude-9.0 earthquake and tsunami were under control.

Despite that declaration, a number of workers have still been exposed to high levels of radiation at the plant.

In September, it was found that total radiation exposure topped 50 millisieverts in 24 workers. But 22 of them, excluding two TEPCO employees who are covered by special measures, are not eligible for the free examinations.

The health ministry categorizes workers at the plant as having engaged in an emergency operation. In October 2011, the ministry established a system that offers free lifetime cancer checks once a year to those who have been exposed to more than 100 millisieverts.

Under the system, employers have to pay the cost--around 50,000 yen (\$600) for one check. If workers quit their companies, the government will shoulder the costs for the checks.

But after the government led by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda declared the containment of the crisis on Dec. 16, the ministry announced the emergency operation was completed in principle. The ministry limited eligible people to those who were exposed to more than 100 millisieverts by one day before the declaration. The number of such workers was 167.

In August, TEPCO said free screenings would be expanded to workers exposed to more than 50 millisieverts by the time of the declaration. This made 663 workers eligible.

An additional measure was introduced that offers free checks to TEPCO employees engaged in specific work, if their exposure levels exceed 50 millisieverts after the declaration, adding 74 more to the eligible list.

In September alone, 27 people received radiation between 10-20 millisieverts at the plant.

Those levels are high under normal circumstances, as contractors for nuclear plants in Japan generally have set their permissible radiation doses at less than 20 millisieverts per year.

Many workers at the Fukushima plant are demanding the time limit be abolished.

Observers are raising concerns that if authorities and TEPCO make light of the issue of health supervision, people would become reluctant to work at the plant, possibly delaying decommissioning, which is expected to take about 40 years.

Under the current system for free checks, workers are not eligible unless they have a figure exceeding 50 millisieverts.

Serious wrongdoing has emerged in relation to radiation exposure.

It turned out that some employees were forced to work without dosimeters and others were forced to use dosimeters covered by lead plates to keep readings low. That means there could be workers not eligible for free screenings who have actually received high doses.

“I’m anxious. I’m not allowed to receive free checks, even though I have no idea about my exposure levels,” said a man in his 30s who was forced to work without a dosimeter in March last year.

TEPCO said it will provide consultation for workers worried about their health.

In a 1999 accident in Ibaraki Prefecture at a nuclear fuel reprocessing facility operated by JCO Co., 170 or so workers were declared eligible for free cancer screenings.

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