

Special allowance not reaching workers involved in disaster cleanup

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By MIKI AOKI/ Staff Writer

Layers of contractors doing decontamination work in disaster areas are apparently siphoning off a special allowance funded by taxpayers that should be going to the workers involved.

In January, the Environment Ministry authorized the start of decontamination work at designated priority facilities, such as municipal government offices, around the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Thousands of workers are involved the task, comprising 18 projects worth a combined 3.5 billion yen (\$43.5 million).

They are eligible for a special daily allowance of between 3,300 yen and 10,000 yen, depending on radiation levels and distance from the plant, in addition to salaries.

The payments are stipulated in agreements between the Environment Ministry and 12 prime contractors.

The Asahi Shimbun has found cases of nonpayment in all six projects worth at least 100 million yen each. Six general contractors are handling the projects in question.

There were many cases in which workers said they have not received an allowance.

Senior officials of several subcontractors admitted they had not paid an allowance. They also said they are not paid an allowance by general contractors, which receive the funds directly from the government.

The Environment Ministry said it will thoroughly investigate the matter to ensure there is no recurrence of the problem.

"The allowance is paid (to compensate) for the risk of exposure to radiation and mental anguish," said Masaaki Kobayashi, director-general of the Environmental Management Bureau. "It will be a serious problem if it is not being paid to workers."

The president of a first-tier subcontractor said the company has not received sufficient funds from the prime contractor to cover the allowance in remunerations.

The company only paid a regular monthly salary of 200,000 yen although an employee worked for one week in areas where a daily allowance of 6,600 yen was stipulated.

The prime contractor told the company to pay the allowance to the employee. In the wage ledger, the company reported it paid the allowance and lowered the amount of salary to balance it out.

The prime contractor, meanwhile, said it had included the allowance in the contract amount to the subcontractor.

Another first-tier subcontractor paid an allowance of 10,000 yen to its employees but did not include the allowance in its contract to a second-tier subcontractor.

"We have no choice because the general contractor would not pay," a company official said. "We want the Environment Ministry to tell (general contractors) to pay sufficient funds for us to pay the allowance."

Of the six general contractors that were each awarded a decontamination project worth at least 100 million yen, Taisei Corp., Shimizu Corp., Kajima Corp., Hazama Corp. and JDC Corp. told The Asahi Shimbun that the allowance has been included in the contract amount. Okumura Corp. declined to comment.

Labor unions and lawyers will soon set up a group to support workers in disaster areas and look into the unpaid special allowance and other issues.

Government-led decontamination work in broader disaster areas has just started in earnest. The government plans to spend 650 billion yen by fiscal 2013. The Environment Ministry has not produced any estimate for expenditures in coming years.

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