

TEPCO president blames one official for misleading Fukushima investigative panel

February 12, 2013

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By HIDEAKI KIMURA/ Staff Writer

Naomi Hirose, president of Tokyo Electric Power Co., denied an organization-wide effort to interfere with a Diet investigation into the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant, saying one official was responsible for spreading misleading information.

Hirose was summoned as an unsworn witness before the Lower House Budget Committee on Feb. 12 to respond to questions from Kiyomi Tsujimoto, a member of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan.

"We would like to cooperate as much as possible," Hirose said when asked about future on-site inspections of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Hirose's statements came after The Asahi Shimbun reported on Feb. 7 that a TEPCO official provided false information to a member of the Diet panel investigating the March 2011 nuclear accident.

Toshimitsu Tamai, then chief of TEPCO's corporate planning department, explained in February 2012 that the No. 1 reactor building was "pitch black" due to covering and was too dangerous for an on-site inspection, given the high radiation levels in parts of the building.

In reality, the cover over the No. 1 reactor building still allowed 10-16 percent of sunlight to enter. It was also equipped with powerful mercury lamps.

The Diet panel member wanted to determine if key equipment at the plant was damaged by the March 11 earthquake, not the tsunami. Such damage would have led to stricter quake-resistance standards at nuclear plants and delayed the restarts of idled reactors.

But after Tamai's warning, the panel member decided not to visit the building.

Hirose explained that the misleading explanation was due to a misunderstanding by Tamai, who served as a liaison with the now-disbanded Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission established by the Diet.

Tamai was likely under the impression that the interior of the No. 1 reactor building was dark, Hirose said, reiterating what the utility has been saying over the past few days.

Hirose also said Tamai, who was a nuclear energy expert of sorts since he had worked at both the Fukushima No. 1 plant and the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture, gave the explanation without consulting with his direct superior.

Tsujimoto asked the TEPCO president who within the TEPCO organizational structure gave instructions to Tamai about his explanations to the Diet panel member.

Hirose ducked the question by saying that Tamai did not explain anything to his superior.

But the president also cast doubt on the supposed lack of knowledge among TEPCO executives on what Tamai was doing.

Hirose, who became TEPCO president last June, said it would have been natural for the TEPCO president to be involved in any explanation given to Diet panel members about an on-site inspection.

He also indicated that the TEPCO chairman and president at the time of Tamai's explanation would be covered in the utility's investigation into Tamai's false explanation. Hirose added that the company wanted to include outside experts on its investigative panel.

Tsujimoto called for a highly independent outside panel to look into the false explanation. She also asked that Tamai be called before the Budget Committee as an unsworn witness.

Shunichi Tanaka, chairman of the Nuclear Regulation Authority, also appeared before the Budget Committee and was asked what the industry watchdog would do if the Diet asked for a probe into the matter.

"We would quickly proceed with such an investigation," Tanaka said.

The Diet investigative panel decided early last year to conduct an on-site inspection after receiving reports that subcontracted workers had seen water on the fourth floor of the No. 1 reactor building following the earthquake.

Those reports indicated that the quake had damaged isolation condensers on that floor.

When Tamai gave his warning to the Diet panel member in February 2012, he showed images of the fourth floor that was receiving light in some locations.

Tamai explained that the pictures were taken before the covering was placed over the reactor, and that lighting was no longer available there.

In fact, the images that Tamai showed were taken four days after the cover was placed over the reactor.

TEPCO added to its embarrassment by including false information in its apology for Tamai's misleading information.

The company's apology, which appeared on its website, said a member of the Diet investigative panel had asked how much light was entering the No. 1 reactor building. In reality, it was a TEPCO official who brought up the topic of light in the reactor.

In its Feb. 11 post on the website, TEPCO again apologized and explained, "As a result of further confirmation, it was learned that a TEPCO official brought up the subject."

The utility repeated that there was no intent to willingly submit a false report to the Diet panel.

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