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Saturday, Dec. 8, 2012

Panel set up to monitor new nuclear watchdog

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Staff writer

The government set up a panel Friday to monitor whether the nation's new nuclear administrative and regulatory bodies are following the recommendations made by the two committees set up by the state and the Diet that investigated the causes of the Fukushima catastrophe.

The panel will be chaired by Koichi Kitazawa, who led a team set up by the Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation, better known as the "private sector" Fukushima investigation panel. The panel is to compile its first report around March after holding several hearings with government officials and regulators from the Nuclear Regulation Authority.

The NRA, a new authority that got off the ground in September, is legally independent but still in its infancy, so the panel will check how the state and NRA are following the recommendations of the Fukushima panels, said Kitazawa, who headed the Japan Science and Technology Agency.

For its March report, the panel, which is expected to monitor the government's nuclear regulatory activities for three years, will basically focus on how the new system is working and whether measures to prevent nuclear disasters are actually improving.

The triple meltdown at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant occurred after the March 11, 2011, magnitude 9 megaquake rocked the Tohoku region and set off tsunami up to 15 meters high that slammed into the plant, knocked out all electricity and took out vital reactor cooling systems.

The two panels said the regulatory system was flawed because it lacked independence from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which was tasked for decades with promoting the nuclear safety myth.

The panels also said the country was ill-prepared for the Fukushima crisis because the notion of handling a disaster of that scale, despite the warnings, was totally out of its scope.

Thus, the investigation panels stressed the need for a strongly independent regulator with greater expertise. Such an authority should actively disclose information to maintain high transparency, the panels concluded.

Other recommendations include a drastic review of the government's crisis-management and disaster-prevention systems to prevent a repeat of the disarray that afflicted the chain of command in the early stages of the crisis and hampered the evacuation of residents in harm's way. The new panel launched Friday also includes Yotaro Hatamura, who headed the state's Fukushima panel, and Kiyoshi Kurokawa, who led the Diet's version, as well as Fukushima Gov. Yuhei Sato.

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