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Watchdog chief blasts nuclear industry for lax safety precautions

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By JIN NISHIKAWA/ Staff Writer

The chief of the Nuclear Regulation Authority said the industry watchdog will not approve restarts of nuclear power plants under the current circumstances due to electric power companies' negligent handling of safety measures.

"I find the current situation exceedingly unsatisfactory," Shunichi Tanaka, chairman of the NRA, said of the utilities' safety precautions at an international meeting on Dec. 14. "Reactors should not go online unless we are convinced of their safety."

His remarks came at the meeting in Tokyo with top officials at nuclear regulators in the United States, Britain and France.

Tanaka said the Japanese nuclear industry's lax approach was behind last year's meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

"The industry's stance was 'simply meeting with regulations is enough,'" he said. "Safety culture has become a mere shell."

Tanaka also said it will take enormous efforts to raise the awareness of safety in the nuclear industry.

The NRA was established in September to increase the nuclear regulator's independence after the accident at the plant, operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co.

Even after the accident, reports have emerged of hazardous situations at nuclear power plants that could lead to an accident.

Bent fuel rods were found in nuclear fuel assemblies kept at TEPCO's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture.

And the Japan Atomic Energy Agency was found to have failed to take proper procedures, including confirming safety, when it postponed checks for nearly 10,000 pieces of equipment at the Monju prototype fast-breeder reactor in Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture.

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