

Japan's nuclear safety agency orders power plant operator to study the impact of Jan. 1 quake

January 10 2024, by Mari Yamaguchi



This aerial photos shows Shika nuclear power plant in Shikamachi, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan, on Jan. 2, 2024. Japan's nuclear safety regulators have told the operator of a nuclear power plant in the area hit by a powerful New Year's Day quake to study its potential impact. The Nuclear Regulation Authority asked for further investigation even though initial assessments showed its cooling systems and ability to contain radiation remained intact. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

Japan's nuclear safety regulators have told the operator of a nuclear power plant in the area hit by a powerful New Year's Day quake to study its potential impact.

The Nuclear Regulation Authority, or NRA, asked for further investigation even though initial assessments showed the Shika nuclear power plant's cooling systems and ability to contain radiation remained intact.

The order reflects Japan's greater vigilance about safety risks after meltdowns in 2011 at a plant in Fukushima, on the northeastern Pacific coast, following a magnitude 9 quake and a massive tsunami.

The Jan. 1 magnitude 7.6 quake and dozens of strong aftershocks have left 206 people dead and dozens more unaccounted for. It also caused a small tsunami. But Hokuriku Electric Power Co., the plant's operator, reported it had successfully dealt with damage to transformers, temporary outages and turbulence in the spent fuel cooling pools that followed the quakes.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi has repeatedly emphasized that the plant was safe. Eighteen of 116 radiation monitoring posts installed in Ishikawa prefecture, where Shika is located, and in neighboring Toyama briefly failed after the quake. All but two have since been repaired and none showed any abnormality, he said.

Shika is a town on the western coast of the Noto peninsula, where the quake did the most damage, leaving roads gaping, toppling and collapsing buildings and triggering landslides.

Hokuriku Electric Power Co., reported that water had spilled from the spent fuel pools in both reactors. Transformers in both reactors were damaged and leaked oil, causing a temporary loss of power in one of the

cooling pools. Company officials reported no further safety problems at the Nuclear Regulation Authority's weekly meeting Wednesday.

But NRA officials said the utility should consider a possibility of fresh damage to transformers and other key equipment as aftershocks continue.



Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi attends a press conference at the prime minister's official office in Tokyo, Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024. Japan's nuclear safety regulators have told the operator of a nuclear power plant in the area hit by a powerful New Year's Day quake to study its potential impact. The Nuclear Regulation Authority asked for further investigation even though initial assessments showed its cooling systems and ability to contain radiation remained intact. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

NRA chairperson Shinsuke Yamanaka urged the utility to thoroughly investigate the cause of the transformer damage and promptly report its findings. Yamanaka also suggested that emergency protocols for residents around plants should be reviewed.

The Shika reactors were inaugurated in 1993 and 2006. They have been offline since the 2011 disaster. Hokuriku Electric applied to restart the newer No. 2 reactor in 2014, but safety checks by the nuclear safety agency were delayed due to the need to determine if there were active faults near the plant. The nuclear officials concluded that faults near the complex are not active and do not affect plant safety.

Hokuriku has expressed hopes to restart the No. 2 reactor by 2026, but safety reviews of the impacts of the latest quake could delay the plan.

Both the government and business leaders generally support restarting the many reactors that were idled for safety checks and upgrades after the Fukushima disaster.

The head of Japan's powerful business organization Keidanren, Masakazu Tokura, visited the Shika plant last year. But on Tuesday he urged the utility to be fully transparent and ensure it was safe.

"Many people are concerned, and I hope (the utility) provides adequate information at an appropriate time," Tokura said.

Correction note (1/10/2024): This story corrects the name of the nuclear safety body to the Nuclear Regulation Authority.

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Citation: Japan's nuclear safety agency orders power plant operator to study the impact of Jan. 1 quake (2024, January 10) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2024-01-japan-nuclear-safety-agency-power.html>

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