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IAEA to visit Japan's damaged nuclear plant

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
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Earthquake damage outside

Japan's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant. Photograph: Koichi Kamoshida/Getty Images

Japan has decided to allow international inspectors to visit the nuclear power plant damaged in last week's earthquake, as fears grow for the safety of the country's nuclear power industry.

The government had initially turned down an offer of help from the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but changed its mind a day later amid pressure from local officials and rising anxiety among residents living near the plant in Kashiwazaki, Niigata prefecture.

Last Monday's earthquake, which measured 6.8 on the Richter scale and killed 10 people and injured more than 1,000 others, also exposed the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant's lack of preparedness. Plant officials reported more than 50 problems caused the quake, including minor radiation leaks and a fire that took almost two hours to put out.

The plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power (Tepco), has been criticised for failing to deal with the blaze and for initially under-reporting the size of the radioactive leaks.

Japan's chief cabinet secretary, Yasuhisa Shiozaki, said Tokyo would cooperate with IAEA inspectors in the hope that other earthquake-prone countries could learn lessons from the Kashiwazaki debacle.

"It will be important for Japan and the IAEA to work together and to analyse the results carefully," he told reporters. "We will cooperate with the IAEA and will probably be making the inspections together."

He said no date had been set for the inspections, but one report said four IAEA officials would arrive early next month. It will be the first time they have been to Japan since two workers were killed in an accident at a uranium reprocessing plant in Tokaimura in 1999.

The Kashiwazaki plant - the biggest in the world in terms of capacity - will remain closed indefinitely and Japan's other 54 nuclear power stations have been ordered to carry out emergency safety checks.

Pressure for a visit by the IAEA inspections was strongest among residents in Kashiwazaki, despite Tepco reassurances that the radiation leaks were minor and pose no threat to their health or the environment.

The local government sent a petition calling on the prime minister, Shinzo Abe, to allow the inspectors in, citing concern about possible damage to local tourism, farming and fishing if public unease about safety continues.

The economy and trade ministry, meanwhile, has ordered 11 power firms to improve firefighting measures at their plants after an investigation revealed that they were not properly equipped to tackle blazes. Most did not have firefighting personnel on duty around the clock and six did not even have a hotline to their nearest fire station.

The Nikkei business newspaper reported that the plant's closure could cost Tepco at least \$1.6bn - halving pre-tax profits forecast for the current fiscal year - if the damaged plant does not reopen by the end of next March.

Tepco warned of possible power cuts if a heatwave this summer generates extra demand for electricity.

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