

Japan: Gov't agencies secretly agreed to put off nuke disaster victim relief until after election

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The Reconstruction Agency secretly agreed with other government agencies to postpone assistance to nuclear disaster victims until after the July 21 House of Councillors election, sources close to the government have revealed.

According to the sources, the Reconstruction Agency and other relevant ministries and agencies agreed in March to put off until after the upper house poll a decision over which organ would lead consideration into radiation dose standards, a crucial step for formulating concrete support measures for nuclear disaster victims under the Act on the Protection and Support for the Children and other Victims of TEPCO Disaster. The law, which is designed to assist residents in areas whose radiation doses surpass certain criteria, is overseen by the Reconstruction Agency.

Such a behind-the-curtain move comes in disregard of nuclear victims' repeated calls for swiftly drawing up support measures, in the face of the prolonged indecision over the radiation dose criteria since the law's enactment on June 21 last year.

The secret agreement had apparently been mentioned in a controversial Twitter comment by a former senior Reconstruction Agency official, who tweeted on March 8, "One of the pending issues was resolved today. To be precise, the concerned parties agreed to leave the matter ambiguous, without determining black or white." The former official, who was in charge of the law for supporting Fukushima victims, was later punished for repeatedly slandering lawmakers and an NGO on his private Twitter account in connection with their recovery efforts.

Because any decision on the dose criteria, based on which the government's medical and life support for children and other residents was to be determined, could draw criticism, the government agencies apparently weighed the possible effects that the decision could have on the upper house race. Almost five months after the secret agreement, examination of the dose criteria has yet to begin.

According to the government sources, the Reconstruction Agency in February sounded out the Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) on its intention to draw up dose criteria for the disaster support law, but the NRA lashed back, saying, "It's not an issue to be decided from a scientific perspective." The NRA oversees the Radiation Council, which is tasked with deliberating radiation exposure standards.

Despite nearly a month of discussions by the Reconstruction Agency, the NRA and the Cabinet Office's Support Team for Residents Affected by Nuclear Incidents, no conclusion was made over which organization would take on the formulation of the dose criteria. The Cabinet Office's support team is in charge of residents' return to areas affected by the nuclear disaster.

Since February, the meetings of section chiefs and counselors of those government bodies were held

at the initiative of the Reconstruction Agency, where a decision to postpone consideration on the dose criteria until after the upper house election was eventually made.

Among the attendants of the meetings was a Reconstruction Agency counselor belonging to its “Fukushima team” — to which the former counselor who was reprimanded for his defamatory tweets also belonged. The meeting was indeed held on March 8, the day the punished counselor tweeted that “One of the pending issues was resolved today.” The meeting has since been held about twice a month, joined also by the Ministry of the Environment, which is in charge of decontaminating radioactive materials emanating from the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

While the national standard dictates that the limit of annual accumulated radiation exposure doses for general members of the public be up to 1 millisievert, the government raised the criteria to 20 millisieverts in demarcating evacuation areas for Fukushima disaster victims. Meanwhile, the abovementioned disaster relief law stipulates that residents who voluntarily evacuated from areas not designated as evacuation zones are also covered by support measures if the radiation doses in those areas exceed certain criteria. While citizens groups supporting nuclear disaster victims claim that the dose criteria should be set at 1 millisievert per year, the government maintains reservations about the decision because extending the areas covered by government support could inflict heavy financial burden on the government. Consideration of the dose criteria also involves a political decision, while disaster victims are expected to react with a backlash depending on the results of the move.

On March 7, Reconstruction Minister Takumi Nemoto stopped short of specifying the deadline for determining the dose criteria at the Nuclear Emergency Response Headquarters, saying, “It is necessary to obtain public understanding based on objective evidence.” Nemoto added that the headquarters was to present a view by the end of the year on measures to reduce radiation exposure in preparation for residents returning to their hometown.

In response to an inquiry by the *Mainichi*, the Reconstruction Agency’s public relations section stated, “We’d like to withhold from comments on the content of measures (mentioned in the March 8 tweet). Since March 7, officials including section chiefs and counselors of concerned ministries and agencies have held meetings on an irregular basis, but the former counselor (who was punished for his Twitter slanders) did not take part in those meetings.”

P.S.

* Mainichi Shimbun, August 01, 2013

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