

Europe nuclear stress tests labeled 'charade' to quell public skepticism

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Stress tests being carried out on European nuclear power plants are a political charade designed to reassure the public that the reactors are fundamentally safe, a member of the European Parliament and a prominent Bulgarian atomic expert said Monday at a seminar in Osaka.

Rebecca Harms, president of the Green Group in the European Parliament, and Gueorgui Kastchiev, a senior nuclear physicist at the Vienna-based University of Natural Resources, said a warning about this practice is needed in Japan, where many of those attending were from towns in Fukui and Niigata prefectures that host nuclear plants.

These facilities are also currently undergoing stress tests, they noted.

"The stress tests in Europe are somewhat similar to the virtual stress tests for European banks that were implemented after the euro crisis. But Europe's politicians decided to make stress tests for real facilities," said Kastchiev, who was formerly head of the Bulgarian Nuclear Safety Authority.

There are 143 reactors in the European Union that have been targeted for stress tests. There is no central nuclear regulator within the EU, so national regulators in each country have appointed their own experts to carry out the tests, he said.

Kastchiev said the decision was made to test for extreme natural events only and that the tests should be conducted on a voluntary basis because there is no way to punish plant operators. Thus, the tests are limited in scope.

"Only power reactors are included in these tests. Research reactors are not included, and there was an accident recently at a research reactor in Hungary that released iodine.

In addition, the short amount of time for the stress tests, only about six months, means there's no time to do new research, only use existing research, which basically says the plants are safe," he said.

The tests only consider external hazards, not potential risks like plant components breaking due to metal fatigue or cooling pipes becoming clogged. And human factors like safety culture are not being discussed, Kastchiev said.