

Japan's Prime Minister Fires Three Nuclear Energy Officials

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TOKYO — Prime Minister [Naoto Kan](#) removed three top officials in charge of Japanese [nuclear energy](#) policy on Thursday, taking aim at the cozy ties between regulators and the power industry that were exposed after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident.

The three officials include Nobuaki Terasaka, the leader of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, the nation's main nuclear regulatory body. The agency has been criticized for allowing inadequate safety measures at the Fukushima plant, including insufficient defenses against the tsunami that was unleashed by a deadly earthquake on March 11.

The agency, which is part of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, has also been accused of trying to manipulate public opinion by planting people at recent town hall-style meetings to speak in support of nuclear power.

The other two officials are Kazuo Matsunaga, the top bureaucrat at the ministry, and Tetsuhiro Hosono, leader of the ministry's energy resources bureau, which promotes the power industry.

The announcement comes nearly five months after the magnitude-9.0 earthquake and the tsunami it unleashed left more than 20,000 dead or missing in northern [Japan](#). The twin disasters also [damaged the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant](#) and led to radiation leaks, the worst since the 1986 nuclear disaster in Chernobyl in Ukraine.

The firing of the three officials is a highly unusual move in Japan, where elite career bureaucrats taken from the top universities have long been the nation's de facto rulers. However, Mr. Kan has begun to focus on the collusion between the government and the power industry in what many here see as a belated effort to prolong his stay in office.

The embattled prime minister had [promised to step down](#) in the face of intense criticism from within his own Democratic Party of the government's slow and seemingly haphazard response to the nuclear disaster. But he has since appeared to backtrack, refusing to say when he will leave office.

He appears to be trying to revive his fortunes by deflecting the criticism onto the bureaucracy. He has also tried to tap the public's deep misgivings about nuclear power by calling for reducing reliance on it in favor of solar and other new energy sources.

Mr. Kan appears to be betting on his reputation as a crusader against inept and corrupt bureaucracy, which he earned as health minister in the 1990s by disclosing how his ministry and industry had tried to cover up the use of HIV-tainted blood. On Sunday, he made his harshest remarks yet about government ties to the nuclear industry, saying it was "exactly the same structure of collusion that I found as health minister during the AIDS blood products problem."

But Mr. Kan's continuing lack of popularity, as well as the critical tone of coverage in the local press, suggests that his efforts may be too little, too late. On Thursday, [Asahi Shimbun](#), one of Japan's largest dailies, warned that the removal of the three officials could backfire by causing more confusion and paralysis in the nation's energy policy.

Still, Mr. Kan appears intent on moving forward with what is increasingly appearing to be a sweeping overhaul of Japanese nuclear oversight.

Besides the officials' removal, the Kan government has also said it is considering a plan to separate the nuclear regulatory agency from the trade ministry, which is also in charge of promoting the power industry, and to relocate it in the environmental ministry. The plan also calls for raising the regulatory body's status to that of a full-fledged government agency, giving it greater power.

There are also signs of further changes to come at the trade ministry, one of the most powerful in Japan. In announcing the removal of the three officials on Thursday, the trade minister, Banri Kaieda, called for "rebuilding" the ministry.

"I'm planning to breathe fresh air into the ministry with a large-scale reshuffle" of personnel, Mr. Kaieda told reporters.

Mr. Kaieda had also promised to step down at an unspecified future time, after clashing with Mr. Kan over the handling of the nuclear crisis. However, Mr. Kaieda has emerged as a point man in Mr. Kan's recent moves to reform the bureaucracy, in what commentators here have said may be an effort by Mr. Kaieda to position himself as a possible successor to Mr. Kan as prime minister.