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face charges over fatal Legionnaires' outbreak

day, February 28, 2003 at 18:00 JST

AZAKI - Police sent papers on the mayor of a Miyazaki Prefecture city and others to prosecutors Friday over a Legionnaires' disease outbreak at a spring that killed seven people last year.

Five are Hyuga Mayor Magoharu Yamamoto, 71, Tetsuro Yuge, deputy mayor Kuniharu Kimura, former manager of the Hyuga Sun-Park Onsen spa, 63, Masafumi Yoshitaka, 55, a part-time spa employee, and Futoshi Iwakiri, 40, who took part in building the spa.

According to investigations, Yamamoto, president of the city-controlled company that owns the spa, and Yuge, a board director of the firm, allegedly neglected to ensure the safety and sanitation of the facility and are accused of causing six people to die and 29 others suffered poor health.

Three others are also suspected of having been remiss in their sanitation management, investigations found.

According to prefectural officials, 295 patients have so far been identified as having contracted the disease or having possibly been infected with it. At present, they put the death toll at seven.

police are accusing the five of causing the deaths of six of the seven. The police were unable to find sufficient evidence on the death of the remaining one.

Hyuga Sun-Park Onsen opened July 1 last year, but halted operations July following reports of the disease. About 20,000 people used the facility during the period.

Yamamoto has indicated he intends to resume operating the hot spring in September, saying in a news conference Friday he will consult with those who support the resumption of the facility. The city of Hyuga owns a 92% interest in the spa.

Speaking to reporters, Yamamoto said he calmly accepts the latest move by the prefecture, and will fulfill his duty to help the victims as well as to resume the facility's operations.

Following on-site inspections, the prefecture conducted water quality checks at the spa's baths and inspected other locations on the premises.

The inspections detected Legionella bacteria in quantities 150,000 times greater than those the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry has set as permissible. The prefecture also found that the water had not been properly chlorinated.

The latest reports of the disease among bathers at the spa mark the largest Legionnaires' infection involving Legionnaires' disease in Japan.

Legionella bacteria causes pneumonia or fever, mostly in the elderly. (Kyodo News)