

Japanese government signals restart of nuclear power plants

By Will Morrow
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Three years after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the Japanese government is moving to restart the country's nuclear plants, all of which remain shut down. A draft energy plan released late last month officially designates nuclear power as a long-term base power source, setting the stage for the resumption of nuclear plant operations.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is preparing to restart the nuclear industry despite overwhelming popular opposition. Yesterday thousands of anti-nuclear protesters marched in Tokyo and several other cities to voice their determination to block Abe's plan.

The earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 caused a partial meltdown of three of the six reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant owned and run by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). The operation to dismantle the reactors and clean up the site will take decades to complete.

Fukushima itself is the scene of an ongoing disaster. Nearly 140,000 residents were forced to evacuate in 2011 and have been told it could be years before they can return. Many have been moved to cramped government-allocated accommodation, including in abandoned schools, with several families to a room.

There are widespread concerns about the possibility of another disaster resulting from cost-cutting by private nuclear companies and their longstanding collusion with government nuclear regulators. Between 300 and 400 tonnes of contaminated radioactive groundwater at Fukushima now flow every day into the ocean. TEPCO, the plant's private operator, has been left in charge of the clean-up effort and has overseen repeated spills of nuclear water, including one on February 20. (See: "Japan: New radioactive water leak at Fukushima")

Since September last year, all of the country's

nuclear plants have been shut down, only the second time such a situation has occurred in 40 years. The government's new Basic Energy Plan states that nuclear power, which previously made up 30 percent of Japanese economic supply, "is an important baseload electricity source."

The document says that the government will "carefully consider the scale of the nuclear power plants" it will maintain, a statement widely understood to signal the possible construction of even more nuclear power reactors. The draft also states, in an attempt to placate mass opposition to the restarting of plants, that nuclear energy dependence would be "reduced as much as possible." But the document also refrains from giving a precise estimate as to what fraction of total energy production will be provided by nuclear power.

Prime Minister Abe is acting on behalf of the nuclear industry and big business as a whole, which is seeking to lower energy costs. In a column on February 26, the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* responded to the government's draft energy plan, stating: "We believe the government's draft shows we are headed in the right direction." The newspaper called on both political parties "not to be swayed by antinuclear sentiment and make judgments based on Japan's serious power situation."

As a result of the nuclear plant shutdown, Japan has been forced to increase imports of liquefied natural gas by 23 percent since 2011. This has led to increases in energy prices of up to 50 percent for businesses, fuelling demands for a restarting of nuclear reactors.

According to *Nippon.com*, Japanese ministry of finance preliminary trade statistics for 2013 showed a record trade deficit of ¥11.47 trillion, up from ¥6.94 trillion the year before. Imports of crude oil were also up by 16.3 percent since 2012 and accounted for more

than 20 percent of total imports.

Despite the increase in energy prices, repeated polls have shown a clear majority of the population opposed to the return of nuclear energy generation. A poll conducted by the *Asahi Shinbun* a week before the February 9 Tokyo election found that 74 percent of respondents wanted nuclear power eliminated completely. Another survey conducted on February 22–23 by the Fuji Television network found 53 percent of 1,000 respondents opposed restarting any nuclear reactors.

Despite mass opposition among Tokyo residents, the media has cynically declared that the results of the Tokyo election constituted a mark of approval for nuclear power. Yoichi Masuzoe, the candidate backed by Abe's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, won the election despite his pro-nuclear stance, defeating two anti-nuclear candidates. The election campaign was dominated by economic and social issues and the turnout was just 46.1 percent.

Underscoring the thoroughly anti-democratic character of the government's nuclear agenda, Abe intentionally delayed publishing its draft Basic Energy Plan until after the Tokyo election, in order to prevent it from becoming a focus of the election.

The opposition DPJ has attempted to campaign on the basis of ending all nuclear production in Japan. However, the DPJ was in government at the time of the Fukushima disaster and restarted the Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui prefecture in July 2012, in the face of mass opposition. Up until May 2012, all nuclear plants had been temporarily shut down for maintenance checks but had not reopened due to popular opposition. The Oi plant—the only running power station—was only closed for maintenance last September.

The government's Nuclear Regulatory Authority (NRA) is currently reviewing applications from seven utilities to restart 16 nuclear reactors, and further applications to begin operations are expected. There is widespread mistrust in the NRA however, an organisation established through the merger of two previous regulatory authorities, which were deeply implicated in collaborating with the major nuclear companies and lax safety requirements.

The Abe government is also determined to keep the nuclear industry operating to maintain Japan's capacity to produce nuclear weapons. Alongside its nuclear

reactors and large plutonium stockpile, the Japanese government is currently in the commissioning stages of the Rokkasho plutonium reprocessing facility. According to a May 2013 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the facility is capable of producing up to nine tonnes of weapons-grade plutonium each year—enough to manufacture 2,000 nuclear bombs.

Abe, backed by the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" aimed at diplomatically and military encircling China, has ratcheted up tensions with Beijing over disputed islands in the East China Sea. His government has boosted the military budget and is seeking to remove constitutional and legal constraints on the aggressive use of Japan's armed forces. Any open move to acquire nuclear weapons would provoke widespread public opposition in the country, where the US dropped two atomic bombs in 1945. Nevertheless by keeping the nuclear industry operating the Abe government keeps that option open.

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