

International New York Times

Japan Pushes to Revive Moribund Nuclear Energy Sector

By HIROKO TABUCHI FEB. 25, 2014

TOKYO — The government of Shinzo Abe made its biggest push yet to revive its nuclear energy program on Tuesday, announcing details of a national plan that designates atomic power as an important long-term electricity source.

The new Basic Energy Plan, which states Japan will push to restart reactors closed in the wake of the Fukushima disaster and suggests it might build new ones, overturns a promise made by a previous government to phase out the country's atomic power plants. It also marks a major vote of confidence for nuclear energy at a time when its worldwide prospects remain clouded by the multiple meltdowns at Fukushima three years ago.

Japan's minister for trade and industry, Toshihiko Motegi, sought to play down the country's policy reversal, telling reporters that Japan was still committed to "reducing its reliance on nuclear power." But he also criticized the earlier commitment by Japan to go nuclear-free, first made by former Prime Minister Naoto Kan in the months after the 2011 accident, calling such a policy "irresponsible" for a resource-poor nation.

Still, the government's own energy plan remained vague, setting no specific targets for the role of nuclear energy in Japan. The country needs more time to figure out its "best mix" of energy sources, which would also include renewables like solar, wind and geothermal power, Mr. Motegi said.

In leading Japan back to nuclear power, Mr. Abe's government must walk a delicate line. Opinion polls show lingering public mistrust of nuclear safety and the government's ability to oversee it.

To ease public jitters, an independent regulatory agency has been evaluating whether Japan's 50 remaining reactors, which are all currently closed, can safely be brought back online. Even with a regulatory go-ahead, however, local opposition could still block or delay reactor restarts.

Those fears were underscored Tuesday after another mishap at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, where a complicated cleanup has been undermined by continued radiation leaks and errors. The plant's operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, said a damaged power cable had shut down a vital cooling system, forcing workers to suspend the removal of delicate spent nuclear fuel rods from a wrecked storage pool.

The cooling system for the spent fuel pool at Reactor No. 4 failed for about four hours on Tuesday before power was restored, the operator said in an emailed announcement. Tokyo Electric Power said that the pool temperature was stable and that it had not detected a rise in radiation levels at the plant.

Despite the plant's woes, there has been strong backing for a return to nuclear energy from Japan's most influential business lobbies, which say the nation's

reactors must be brought back online to ease a crippling energy crunch. Before the 2011 accident, Japan was one of the world's largest generators of nuclear power, relying on atomic energy for about 30 percent of its electricity needs. Since then, Japan has made up for the shortfall by increasing imports of oil and gas, which has caused energy prices to rise in Japan and weighed on its trade balance.

And nationally, organized opposition to nuclear power — which erupted in the months following the Fukushima accident into mass street rallies — has failed to materialize. In a closely watched gubernatorial race in Tokyo this month, a fractured field of antinuclear candidates appeared to split the opposition vote, helping to return a pro-nuclear, governing party candidate to office. That victory has given momentum to Mr. Abe's push for a return to nuclear power.

Mr. Kan, the former prime minister who led the country's response to the Fukushima crisis, blasted the government's nuclear turn.

"This government has not learned the lessons of Fukushima," he said by telephone. "Japan was on the brink. But now, we want to go back to nuclear for economic reasons. But what happens to the economy if another disaster hits?"

Japan's new energy plan calls nuclear power an important "baseload" electricity source — one that can produce energy at a constant rate and lower cost than alternatives like solar or wind power. Renewable energy proponents have argued that safety risks and the costs of handling nuclear waste ultimately make nuclear power less reliable and more expensive than other clean energy options.

The plan also says that Japan will ultimately decide on the appropriate size of its nuclear program after taking into account its future energy needs, as well as the country's commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which have surged with the decline of nuclear power. The wording, Japanese news outlets noted, left the door open for Japan to add to its current nuclear system.