

Japanese PM orders restart of nuclear reactors

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Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda overrode safety concerns and popular opposition to order the reactivation of two reactors at the Oi nuclear plant last Saturday. The move, which was welcomed in business circles, is regarded as the first step in restarting all the country's functional reactors, which were shut down in the aftermath of the catastrophe at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant following the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The Fukushima disaster, second only to the world's worst—the 1986 explosion at Chernobyl—resulted in the partial meltdown of three of the plant's six reactors. More than 80,000 residents were forced to evacuate from the exclusion zone around the plant and have been told that it could be decades before they can return.

As of early May, all Japan's 50 nuclear reactors had been shut down. In many cases, the reactors were taken off-line either for regular maintenance or to meet new safety requirements, but have been unable to reopen due to widespread public distrust of the power companies and the government.

Up to 10,000 people took part in a demonstration in Tokyo on Saturday to protest against Noda's announcement. The following day, more than 2,000 joined a Fukui city protest, in the same prefecture as the Oi nuclear plant. Local mayors across Japan have signed a letter to the prime minister protesting against the decision.

According to a *Mainichi Shimbun* poll earlier this month, 71 percent of respondents cautioned against an early start of the Oi reactors, with only 25 percent in support. Last Friday, an anti-nuclear group headed by Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe presented Noda with a petition with 7.5 million signatures calling for the

abolition of nuclear power.

Noda took the decision to reactivate reactors 3 and 4 at the Oi plant under pressure from big business, including the powerful corporate energy lobby. The plant's operator, Kansai Electric Power, had warned that without the plant, demand for electricity would exceed supply by about 15 percent during the summer. The company supplies the Kansai region, which includes the cities of Osaka and Kyoto, the country's second largest urban area.

Noda highlighted potential electricity shortages facing ordinary people. But the main concern in the corporate elites is the lack of power for industry, which has been hard hit not only by last year's triple disaster—the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis—but the worsening global economic crisis, especially in Europe. Despite relatively strong growth in the first quarter of an annualised 4.7 percent, Japan's economic outlook remains highly uncertain.

The credit rating agency Moody's cautiously welcomed Noda's decision as “an indication of an emerging consensus” to reactivate the country's nuclear plants that was “important to returning the [power] industry to profitability.” The closure of the country's nuclear plants led to financial losses in almost all nuclear-dependent utilities in the last fiscal year.

The two plants will restart even before the government has put a new nuclear regulatory system in place. The Fukushima disaster exposed the close relations between the plant's operator, the Tokyo Electric Company (TEPCO) and the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) which oversaw it. The powerful Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (MITI), which supervised

NISA, is also responsible for promoting the nuclear industry.

NISA took limited action against TEPCO, the world's fourth largest power corporation, despite its long record of serious safety breaches, falsification of safety inspection reports and persecution of whistleblowers. TEPCO was left in charge of the Fukushima plant even though its handling of the crisis was geared to protecting its investment and minimising the financial fallout rather than ensuring that the reactors were brought under control as safely and quickly as possible.

In an effort to reassure the public, the government has insisted that all nuclear reactors undergo "stress tests" and implement safety precautions to prevent a repetition of a Fukushima-type disaster. The sea walls at the Fukushima plant were not high enough to prevent the tsunami from swamping the emergency power generators that were required at the height of the crisis. The lack of power and the loss of the reactor cooling systems quickly led to dangerous increases in the core temperature of the three operational reactors, threatening a full-scale meltdown.

However, the "stress tests" and safety measures are aimed more at stemming intense public opposition than establishing comprehensive procedures to cover all contingencies at Japan's nuclear plants. Noda's announcement about the Oi plant came the day after the parliament passed a bill to establish a new Nuclear Regulatory Authority (NRA) linked to the Ministry of Environment rather than MITI. The NRA has yet to be established or draw up new safety guidelines.

In comments to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Toyo University academic Mitsuhiro Watanabe raised concerns about the restart. He said he did not oppose nuclear power, but believed there was scientific evidence that pointed to the possibility of "shattered zones" or active faults, beneath the Oi power plant. He challenged those supporting Noda's decision to state "safety is not secured, but we are allowing restart for various other reasons."

The haste with which Noda ordered the Oi plant back on line indicates that profit, not safety, will continue to dominate the functioning of the nuclear regulatory apparatus. Trade and Industry Minister Yukio Edano declared that there could be no absolute guarantees of nuclear safety in a country prone to earthquakes. "There

is no such thing as a perfect score when it comes to disaster prevention steps," he said.

Prior to his announcement, Noda secured the agreement of two local figures—the mayor of Oi and the governor of the Fukui Prefecture. Their agreement, however, simply underscores the heavy economic dependence of the area on the nuclear industry—14 reactors are stretched out along 50 kilometres of coastline known as Japan's "nuclear alley". The region receives substantial government subsidies as a result.

The town of Oi is reliant on the nuclear plant: about 450 of the population of 2,700 are directly employed there and many local businesses depend on the plant either directly or indirectly. "Nuclear power is like a money tree around here," local anti-nuclear campaigner Jiku Miyazaki explained to the *Christian Science Monitor*. Not surprisingly, an opinion poll found that 64 percent of the town's population supported the restart, as opposed to just 34 percent in nearby areas.

There are safety fears, however, even among those who support the reopening of the plant. Hiromichi Muramatsu, who owns a liquor store in Oi, told the *Monitor*: "My sales have plunged since the reactors were switched off, so from a financial point of view I'd like things to go back to the way they were.... the government has to make sure it does this properly to ensure safety, but I'm not sure it has thought through every scenario. For me, the restart has come too early."

The decision to reactivate the nuclear industry comes as the government is already facing intense opposition to its plans to increase the country's deeply unpopular sales tax. The mishandling of the Fukushima disaster was a major factor in the plummeting support for the previous prime minister, Naoto Kan, that led to his resignation last August. Noda confronts similar political difficulties as he implements the demands of big business.



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