

# Four years after Fukushima disaster, government to restart Japan's nuclear plants

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Four years after a massive earthquake and tsunami devastated parts of northern Japan, the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant is still decades from being decommissioned and environmental problems continue to mount. As the anniversary passed last week, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was planning to reopen the nation's nuclear plants despite widespread public opposition and ongoing safety concerns.

Japan's 48 nuclear plants have been offline since September 2011. The plants were shut down following the partial meltdowns at the Fukushima plant. Reactors 3 and 4 at Kansai Electric Power Company's Ōi plant in Fukui Prefecture, were restarted in July 2012, before being closed again the following year.

Opinion polls have consistently shown that the majority of people do not want the plants to be reactivated. Prime Minister Abe, however, is pushing ahead, under pressure from the electric companies. "We cannot go zero-nuclear based on the opinion polls alone," Abe told parliament in February. Before the disaster, Japan relied on nuclear energy for 30 percent of its power needs.

Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) president Naomi Hirose stated in February that the restart of its Kashiwazaki Kariwa plant was crucial to maintaining profits. "Even as Kashiwazaki Kariwa remains offline, we posted a profit last year and can probably do so again this year," Hirose said. "I wouldn't say there won't be the third time, but we cannot expect it can last forever." The plant is located 220 kilometers northwest of Tokyo. TEPCO is the owner of the crippled Fukushima plant.

Four years after the disaster, radiation leaks from the Fukushima plant have not been stopped. TEPCO confirmed last month that radioactive material was still

seeping into the ocean. The company was aware of the problem last May, but delayed reporting it. Rainwater, which had pooled on a roof of the plant, was contaminated before leaking into the ocean through a gutter. The water contained radiation levels 10 times higher than water from other sections of the plant's roof.

Earlier this month, TEPCO admitted that 750 tons of contaminated water had overflowed from storage areas containing tanks. Large quantities of water have to be continuously injected into the reactors because their cooling systems were badly damaged during the disaster. As it repeatedly did prior to the catastrophe, the company is continuing to put its profits ahead of public health and safety.

The disaster occurred on March 11, 2011 when the Tōhoku earthquake, which registered a magnitude of 9.0, struck off the Pacific coast of central Japan, creating a 15-meter tsunami. The massive wave crashed into the Fukushima Daiichi plant, sweeping over an inadequate seawall and knocking out all power and emergency generators.

The cores of three of the plant's six reactors quickly overheated as cooling systems shut down. Rapid action by workers in finding ways to inject water into the reactors prevented a catastrophic total meltdown. However, hydrogen gas explosions damaged the reactor buildings and substantial amounts of radiation escaped into the environment, including from a damaged fuel rod storage tank atop a fourth reactor.

Despite the scale of the disaster, the Abe government is pressing ahead with restarting nuclear plants with only nominal changes to the regulatory regime and safety standards. Two reactors at the Sendai nuclear plant are due to reopen this year, possibly in June. The plant, located in the southern Kagoshima Prefecture, is

operated by Kyushu Electric Power Company. It received approval to resume operations last November following a vote by the prefecture's assembly.

For residents in the region around the Fukushima plant, the nightmare is continuing. In 2011, people were often evacuated in a haphazard manner, with the affected zones expanding several times in one day. In some cases, residents were unaware that they were moved into high radiation areas. According to the Japanese government, 230,000 people are still displaced and of those 80,000 are living in temporary housing.

Cancer rates are expected to rise considerably for those exposed to the radiation. The World Health Organization stated in 2013 that among people exposed to radiation as infants there is a 7 percent higher risk of males and 6 percent higher risk of females of developing leukemia and breast cancer respectively.

Children are also highly susceptible to developing thyroid cancer. Checkups are being conducted on the 367,707 people under the age of 18 living in the Fukushima Prefecture when the meltdowns occurred at the power plant. Children born afterward have also been tested. More than 100 confirmed or suspected cases of thyroid cancer have been reported. Typically, only about 1 to 9 cases of cancer are expected among 1 million children.

Some doctors have questioned these findings, saying that thyroid cancer often presents no symptoms and that the increased numbers are due to increased testing. Undoubtedly, the government and TEPCO will seize on these comments to deny responsibility for the health effects caused by the Fukushima disaster.

Megumi Muto, a mother of two children exposed to radiation, expressed the concerns and anger many parents are feeling. "They had rashes on their bodies then nose bleeds. My son's white cells have decreased and they both have incredible fatigue," Muto said. "They may not have cancer now but they both have multiple nodules around their thyroids. I'm really worried."

No-one has been held accountable for the negligence and lack of safety measures at the plant before the earthquake and tsunami struck. Reactivating nuclear plants without adequate safety measures in one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world is only setting the stage for future disasters.



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