

Japanese marched to celebrate the last of this nation's 50 nuclear reactors switching off but gov't drive already on to restart Oi plant

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Contents

- [63% of Japanese citizens \(...\)](#)
- [Minamata: Citizens' gathering](#)
- [Thousands march as Japan \(...\)](#)
- [Japan nuke-free for first \(...\)](#)

Citizens' group seeks referendum on restart of nuclear reactors

TOKYO (Kyodo) — A citizens' group said Thursday it has collected around 323,000 signatures in favor of a referendum to determine whether nuclear reactors in Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s service area should be restarted.

The group, Let's Decide Together/Citizen-Initiated National Referendum on Nuclear Power, submitted the signatures to the Tokyo metropolitan government, and the metropolitan assembly is expected to hold a vote on adopting an ordinance for the proposed referendum in June.

Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara has indicated his opposition to the adoption of such an ordinance.

The proposal from the group calls for Tokyo residents aged 16 or older, including permanent foreign residents, to vote in the referendum to decide whether nuclear reactors in Tokyo Electric's service area should be reactivated.

The Tokyo governor and the metropolitan assembly would be required to urge the central government and Tokyo Electric to respect the referendum result, according to the proposal.

Tokyo Electric is the operator of the crippled Fukushima Daiichi complex.

Kyodo Press, May 11, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120511p2g00m0dm011000c.html>

63% of Japanese citizens say 'no' to restarting of Oi nuclear reactors: Mainichi poll

Sixty-three percent of Japanese people stand against reactivating two idled reactors at the Oi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukui Prefecture, and 74 percent say they "can endure" restricted use of electricity in the summer, a nationwide survey conducted by the Mainichi shows, suggesting that the general public is becoming increasingly in favor of breaking away from nuclear power generation.

The survey, conducted on May 5 and 6, shows only 31 percent of people agreeing to restart the No. 3 and 4 reactors that have been offline for regular inspections at the Oi nuclear power station. Seventy-four percent, or nearly three in four Japanese, polled say they "can endure" restrictions, if imposed, on the use of electricity during the summer due to no power supply from nuclear reactors in the country.

The survey also shows 77 percent of people say they "do not trust" new safety standards the government compiled in April in a bid to seek consent from local residents and governments on the reactivation of the idled reactors. Only 16 percent of people say they "trust" the new nuclear safety standards, underscoring the fact that public distrust in the government's procedures has led people to firmly stand against the reactivation of the nuclear reactors.

Looking at public awareness of potential restricted use of electricity in the upcoming summer by regions, the survey shows 61 percent of people in the Kinki region, which is expected to face the most serious power shortage, say they "can endure" such restrictions. Seventy-nine percent of people in the Kanto region, which took sweeping energy-saving measures last summer, also say they can put up with restricted use of power. Meanwhile, more than 70 percent of people polled elsewhere in the country say they can live with such restrictions.

Public support for the Cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, meanwhile, dropped 1 point to 27 percent from a previous survey conducted in April. Support for the Noda Cabinet has steadily been declining over the past several months. The disapproval rating for the Noda Cabinet rose 2 points to 50 percent from the previous survey. This is the first time the disapproval rating for the current Cabinet has topped the 50 percent level since Noda took office in September last year.

People in some parts of Fukushima Prefecture, including those areas designated as evacuation zones in the wake of the outbreak of the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear plant, were not subject to the Mainichi survey.

Mainichi Shimbun, May 08, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120508p2a00m0na014000c.html>

Minamata: Citizens' gathering focuses on Minamata, Fukushima

TOKYO (Kyodo) — A Minamata disease sufferer suggested at a citizens' gathering Sunday that the government has learned no lessons from the mercury-poisoning disease dating back to the 1950s and repeated bungles in tackling the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

"People found crows and doves unable to fly in the coastal areas of Minamata, while livestock such

as pigs and chickens died after eating fish entrails in the early 1950s," Takeshi Sugimoto said in a speech at the meeting in Tokyo. "And handicapped babies were born in the areas."

They were apparently contaminated with mercury-laced water dumped by chemical maker Chisso Corp. into Minamata Bay, which led health authorities to officially recognize Minamata disease on May 1, 1956.

The gathering was sponsored by nonprofit organization Minamata Forum to mark the 56th anniversary of the official recognition of Minamata disease, which causes various symptoms, such as sensory impairment in the limbs.

"We were aware that something odd was happening, but we could not ban fishing in the bay and could not stop the discharge of water (from the Chisso factory) in the absence of sufficient information," Sugimoto, a 72-year-old fisherman from Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, told the audience of around 700 people.

"It has been said on various occasions that we need to learn lessons from Minamata disease, but the government has made mistakes in tackling the Fukushima nuclear disaster as it did" in dealing with the disease, he said.

It has been pointed out following the nuclear crisis at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima Daiichi power complex that the government's failure to disclose data on the predicted dispersion of radioactive materials, collected by its System for Prediction of Environmental Emergency Dose Information, caused unnecessary exposure to people living nearby.

Sugimoto, who was certified as a Minamata disease sufferer in 1981 at the age of 42, also said in the case of Minamata, it had been a taboo to publicly talk about the disease. "If someone in a family developed the disease, they hid the victim in an inner chamber."

It was once believed that Minamata disease was contagious, stirring discrimination against its victims and their families as well as Minamata citizens as a whole.

Genichiro Takahashi, a popular writer who also spoke at the gathering, said referring to the suspension on Saturday of Japan's last operating commercial nuclear reactor at Hokkaido Electric Power Co.'s Tomari complex, "It is a good opportunity for us to think about what kind of world we should and want to create."

"We need to learn from (the disasters of) Minamata and Fukushima and hand the lessons down to the future," said Takahashi, also a professor at Meiji Gakuin University.

The third speaker, Yuko Tanaka, professor of modern Japanese culture at Hosei University, said she went through the issues surrounding Minamata disease during her younger days, and that she felt that she lived at the expense of others.

"Now I think the Minamata issue was behind Japan's postwar high economic growth," she said.

In 1956, the year when Minamata disease was officially recognized, the then Economic Planning Agency proudly declared the end of the postwar reconstruction era at the dawn of the period of high economic growth.

Kyodo Press, May 07, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120507p2g00m0dm037000c.html>

Thousands march as Japan shuts off nuclear power

TOKYO (AP) — Thousands of Japanese marched to celebrate the last of this nation's 50 nuclear reactors switching off Saturday, shaking banners shaped as giant fish that have become a potent anti-nuclear symbol.

Japan will be without electricity from nuclear power for the first time in four decades when one of three reactors at Tomari nuclear plant in the northern island of Hokkaido goes offline for routine maintenance checks.

After last year's March 11 quake and tsunami set off meltdowns at Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, no reactor stopped for checkups has restarted amid growing public worries about the safety of nuclear technology.

"Today is a historical day," shouted Masashi Ishikawa to a crowd gathered at a Tokyo park, some holding traditional "Koinobori" carp-shaped banners for Children's Day that have grown into a symbol of the anti-nuclear movement.

"There are so many nuclear plants, but not a single one will be up and running today, and that's because of our efforts," Ishikawa said.

The activists said that it was fitting that the day Japan will stop using nuclear power coincided with the nation's annual Children's Day, because of their concerns about protecting children from radiation, which Fukushima Dai-ichi is still spewing into the air and water.

The government has been eager to restart nuclear reactors, warning about blackouts and rising emissions as Japan is forced to turn to oil and gas for energy.

Japan now requires reactors to pass new tests to withstand quakes and tsunami and needs local residents' approval to restart them.

The response from people living near the nuclear plants has been mixed, with some wanting them back in operation because of jobs, subsidies and other benefits to the local economy.

Major protests, like the one Saturday, have been generally limited to urban areas like Tokyo, which had gotten electricity from faraway nuclear plants, including Fukushima Dai-ichi.

Before the nuclear crisis, Japan relied on nuclear power for a third of its electricity needs.

The crowd at the anti-nuclear rally, estimated at 5,500 by organizers, shrugged off government warnings about a power shortage. If anything, they said, with all the reactors going offline one by one, it was clear the nation didn't really need nuclear power.

Whether Japan will suffer a sharp power crunch is still unclear.

Electricity shortage is expected only at peak periods, such as the middle of the day in hot weather, and critics of nuclear power say the proponents are exaggerating the consequences to win public approval to restart reactors.

Hokkaido Electric Power Co. spokesman Kohei Ofusa said Saturday's shutdown was going ahead as planned. Power generation is gradually being turned down from 5 p.m. (0800 GMT) with all operation ending at 11 p.m. (1400 GMT), he said.

Yoko Kataoka, a retired baker and grandmother, who was dancing to the music at the rally waving a small paper Koinobori, said she was happy the reactors were going off.

"Let's leave an earth where our children and grandchildren can all play without worries," she said, wearing a shirt that had, "No thank you, nukes," handwritten in the back.

Mainichi Shimbun, May 05, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120505p2g00m0dm034000c.html>

Novelist, Buddhist nun Setouchi joins anti-nuclear hunger strike

TOKYO,(Kyodo) — Novelist and Buddhist nun Jakucho Setouchi joined a hunger strike Wednesday in front of the industry ministry in Tokyo in protest against the government's moves to restart idled reactors at the Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture.

Setouchi, 89, together with writers Hisae Sawachi, 81, and Satoshi Kamata, 73, plans to stage her hunger strike, which is being conducted by a civic group, until sunset.

Pinning a band with the message "no to reactivation" to her nun's habit, Setouchi said Japan is in as bad a state as she has known in her almost 90 years of life, adding, "I can't hand over the current Japan to the younger generation."

She described the government's moves to restart two idled reactors at Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Oi nuclear power plant after the Fukushima nuclear crisis as "scary." "I think they are acting strangely," she said.

Setouchi has been calling for the abolition.

Kyodo Press, May 02, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120502p2g00m0dm093000c.html>

Japan nuke-free for first time since '70 — Tomari unit shut down but drive already on to restart Oi plant

Japan was running without nuclear power for the first time in 42 years Saturday, as the final commercial reactor in operation was shut down for routine maintenance.

Hokkaido Electric Power Co. gradually started taking reactor 3 at its Tomari nuclear plant offline around 5 p.m., and operations completely halted by 11 p.m.

No reactors shut for regular scheduled checks have gone back online since the triple-meltdown crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 power station in March 2011. All 50 of the nation's viable reactors must now undergo mandatory two-stage stress tests to determine if they can resume operations, a measure introduced amid the nuclear crisis.

But the government and power companies also have to win approval in the court of public opinion, which has soured against atomic energy after the massive radioactive fallout emitted by the Fukushima facility's crippled reactors, and the mass evacuations that ensued.

The government hopes to restart two idled reactors at Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Oi nuclear plant in Fukui Prefecture to prevent an electricity shortage this summer in western Japan, but the public remains wary, stung by one of the world's worst nuclear crises.

The last time all of Japan's commercial reactors were taken offline was between April 30 and May 4, 1970, just four years after nuclear power generation began. Back then, the country only had two operating reactors: one at Japan Atomic Power Co.'s Tokai power plant in Ibaraki Prefecture, and the other at its Tsuruga facility in Fukui Prefecture.

The number of viable commercial reactors dropped to 50 after reactors 1 to 4 at the Fukushima No. 1 complex were officially declared defunct.

Last month, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and key members of his Cabinet decided that firing up the No. 3 and 4 reactors at the Oi power station is essential to ensure a stable supply of electricity in the Kansai region in summertime.

Industry minister Yukio Edano, who oversees the operators of nuclear plants, has said the possibility of rolling blackouts can't be ruled out if no atomic energy is available by then.

Nuclear power accounted for about a third of the nation's electricity output before the Fukushima disaster, but plans had been drawn up for reactors to supply some 50 percent by fiscal 2030.

The government and utilities aggressively promoted atomic energy, touting its efficiency and arguing that nuclear plants help to curb global warming since they emit no carbon dioxide. They also introduced mixed uranium-plutonium oxide (MOX) fuel and were pursuing a nuclear fuel recycling strategy to extract plutonium from spent fuel.

But the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe shattered these plans and forced the government to rethink its energy policy, now that the public has become well aware of the hazards of atomic power.

The crisis also led the government to implement more stringent safety measures for all of the nation's reactors.

Last May, then-Prime Minister Naoto Kan issued an unprecedented order to Chubu Electric Power Co. to idle its Hamaoka nuclear plant in Shizuoka Prefecture, because of projections that a massive earthquake will strike the area at some point. These quake predictions were hardly new, but after the triple meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 facility they suddenly started to be taken far more seriously.

Work is afoot to build a much higher seawall at the Hamaoka plant to offer better protection against tsunami, since the massive waves triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake last March swept effortlessly over similar defenses at the Fukushima No. 1 plant.

The first stage of the reactor stress tests Kan's administration introduced last July includes computer

simulations to gauge the robustness of reactors against stronger-than-forecast earthquakes and tsunami. Under the new safety rules, reactors idled for scheduled inspections can't resume operations unless they pass the first stage.

The test results for the two reactors at the Oi plant have already been endorsed by the nuclear industry watchdog, putting them at the forefront of the government's push to get units back online.

But efforts to gain public support for restarting the Oi reactors have made little headway. Local government leaders near the plant, including the governors of Kyoto and Shiga prefectures and the mayor of Osaka, are reluctant to agree to any restart.

A nationwide poll of 1,019 people conducted by Kyodo News from April 28 to 29 found that 59.5 percent of respondents oppose firing up the two reactors, while 26.7 percent are in favor.

The utilities powering the world's third-biggest economy, meanwhile, have been forced to turn to thermal power generation to keep factories, offices and households supplied with electricity, incurring massive additional fuel costs in the process.

The oil and liquefied natural gas that utilities are currently having to procure to power thermal plants could result in higher electricity bills. Tokyo Electric Power Co., which operates the stricken Fukushima No. 1 complex, has already hiked its rate for large-lot users by an average of 17 percent and hopes to raise household charges next.

On a local level, the prolonged and widespread halt of reactors has cast a shadow over the economies of municipalities hosting nuclear plants, where residents and businesses depend on them for much of their income.

However, it is still uncertain when the nation's commercial reactors will be allowed to resume operations. Noda and three key ministers plan to make a formal decision on the Oi reactors after taking the views of local authorities and residents into account.

Kyodo Press, May 6, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120506a1.html>

With no nuke reactors in operation, Japan struggles to chart new energy strategy

As Japan no longer has any operating commercial nuclear reactors following the halt of its last commercial nuclear reactor on the night of May 5, the reality in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster symbolizes a major turning point in the nation's energy policy.

The government, citing a possible summertime power shortage, is trying to restart the No. 3 and No. 4 reactors at the Oi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukui Prefecture, while exploring the feasibility of ending Japan's reliance on nuclear power in the long run.

But the government has yet to chart a course toward a future nuclear energy strategy because it is uncertain if Japan will follow in the footsteps of Germany and graduate from atomic energy or how it will find alternative sources of energy to replace nuclear power.

The basic policy panel of the Advisory Committee for Natural Resources and Energy, an advisory

body to the economy, trade and industry minister, has held debate on a review of Japan's current energy plan since April. Members of the panel have been divided over a ratio of nuclear power in relation to the nation's total power generation in 2030. Under the energy plan mapped out in June 2010, the government had proposed building more than 14 new reactors and raising the share of nuclear power in relation to total domestic power generation to 53 percent by 2030.

Panel members came up with four scenarios highlighting figures on a desirable energy mix for 2030 ranging in the share of nuclear power from zero to 35 percent as well as one scenario which would ask users to choose such a share to analyze possible effects on the nation's employment and economy. The panel will narrow down the options before presenting them to the public but difficulties in having the plan accepted are expected.

During meetings of the basic policy panel, anti-nuclear members criticized a proposal to set the share of nuclear power at 35 percent, saying it runs counter to the government's policy to end Japan's reliance on nuclear power and questions the wisdom of the panel. They demanded the proposal be dropped from the options. They also argued that the public will not accept the proposal because the 35 percent share is far bigger than a share of about 26 percent in fiscal 2010 prior to the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

On the other hand, some further members who were former business leaders expressed concern about a possible deepening power shortage due to a sudden departure from nuclear generation and supported measures to restart idled nuclear reactors based on the premise of safety confirmation and on keeping the share of nuclear power at the current level of more than 20 percent.

The government is also undecided on the fate of aging nuclear power plants. A nuclear power safety reform bill now before the Diet sets the service span of nuclear plants at 40 years in principle but it can be extended for a maximum of 20 years in exceptional circumstances. Nuclear disaster minister Goshi Hosono says nuclear reactors will be decommissioned after 40 years in principle but the definition of exceptional circumstances is vague.

Some government officials suggest that the service life of nuclear reactors can be extended to 60 years only once if nuclear power operators apply.

According to the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, the share of nuclear energy will automatically drop to 13 to 15 percent in 2030 based on an assumption that nuclear reactors will be decommissioned after 40 years. But if the 60-year exceptional proposal is approved, the nuclear share may total 28 to 32 percent.

Efforts to find alternative sources of power generation which are essential for an end to nuclear power are unclear. The government is pinning its hopes on renewable energy sources such as solar power and wind-power generation.

Under a new system to oblige electric power companies to purchase all electricity from renewable energy operators from July, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry plans to set the price tag of solar power at 42 yen per kilowatt per hour to encourage renewable energy operators. But even if large-scale hydraulic power is combined, raising the share of renewable energy from the current 10 percent to 25 to 35 percent in 2030 is not so easy.

The power-generating costs of renewable energy are higher than those of thermal power generation at 9 to 10 yen per kilowatt per hour and are added to utilities fees, causing greater burden on households and companies. Unless those costs are cut, the government will not be able to promote renewable energy.

The combined share of cogeneration reusing thermal energy derived from power generation for air conditioning and hot water and corporate in-house power generation is 15 percent at best. Accordingly, greater thermal power generation fired by liquefied natural gas is a realistic alternative to nuclear power but it also poses problems such as surging fuel costs and emissions of greenhouse gases.

Mainichi Shimbun, May 07, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120507p2a00m0na014000c.html>

With no nuclear power, providers fire up thermal plants but remain wary of glitches

Japan's power companies are firing up their thermal power plants as the nation prepares for a summer without nuclear power, while remaining wary of glitches that could disable aging equipment.

One year and two months after the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami that sparked a crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant in March 2011, all of Japan's nuclear reactors have been shut down. If Japan faces a scorching summer this year, resulting in increased use of air conditioning, the nation will have to depend on thermal power plants to meet electricity demands. However, many of these aging thermal power plants are over 40 years old. With reserve power supplies practically down to zero, the sudden halt of even one power plant could result in a major blackout — leaving power suppliers treading on thin ice.

At Tokyo Electric Power Co.(TEPCO)'s Yokosuka Thermal Power Station, located on the southwest bank of Tokyo Bay, operations were reactivated in June last year for the first time in one year and three months to meet electricity demand in the wake of the nuclear crisis. No-entry signs are displayed at a number of spots on the premises, as pipes leading to chimneys are badly rusted and exhaust fumes are leaking.

"When operating aging equipment that started functioning nearly half a century ago, small flaws pop up all over the place. If there's a flaw directly linked to power generation, then we'll stop the plant and conduct repairs, but the temperature of these exhaust fumes is under 200 degrees Celsius, and as long as people don't go near them, it's all right," said Jin Ogawara, a group manager in TEPCO's thermal power division.

Electric power companies have been in the process of carrying out renovations to maximize the output at some thermal power plants. However thermal plants are not designed to withstand full output for extended periods. On Feb. 3, problems with the fuel supply system at Kyushu Electric Power Co.'s Shin-Oita thermal power plant — a state-of-the-art plant that began operating in 1991 — resulted in an emergency suspension of operations. This very nearly resulted in rolling blackouts, according to an official at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. At the time, Kansai Electric Power Co. and other parties stepped in to provide assistance and they made through the situation, but power companies remain apprehensive over a situation in which even state-of-the-art equipment could suddenly grind to a halt.

Now companies are keeping a close eye on their equipment, placing technicians on standby, but their fears of a major power cut resulting from a sudden suspension of operations linger.

Mainichi Shimbun, May 07, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120507p2a00m0na011000c.html>

Gov't checks electricity supply after halt of last running reactor

TOKYO (Kyodo) — The Japanese government held its fourth meeting Monday to ascertain electricity supply and demand for this summer, as the nation is without nuclear power-generated electricity for the first time in 42 years.

The last operating commercial reactor, the No. 3 unit of Hokkaido Electric Power Co.'s Tomari nuclear power plant, was brought to a stable state of cold shutdown at around 11 a.m. Monday after ending its electricity generation Saturday night for routine maintenance.

With all of Japan's 50 commercial reactors now suspended, the government is accelerating efforts to verify how much electricity will be available this summer, with the aim of compiling the outcome as early as later this week.

At the latest meeting with experts, the government presented an estimate that the areas covered by Kansai Electric Power Co. will face a power shortage of 14.9 percent this summer, slightly better than the 16.3 percent shortage the utility projected in April but still a severe situation.

The government is trying to restart two offline reactors of Kansai Electric, which relied particularly heavily on nuclear power before the Fukushima nuclear crisis, but its efforts in relation to the firm's Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture appear to have made little headway.

Since the massive earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, triggered the world's worst nuclear crisis in 25 years at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima Daiichi power plant, resulting in radiation leaks, mass evacuations and heightened public concern over nuclear safety, none of the Japanese reactors halted for scheduled checkups have been restarted.

The reactor in the village of Tomari on Japan's northernmost main island reduced its output power from 5 p.m. Saturday and had its nuclear fission reaction ended at around 4 a.m. Sunday.

To check the nation's electricity supply and demand condition for this summer, the government launched the meeting with experts on April 23.

Kyodo Press, May 07, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120507p2g00m0dm105000c.html>
