

Thousands rally in Japan against nuclear power

By Harumi Ozawa (AFP) 07 05 2011

TOKYO — Thousands of people rallied in Japan Saturday to demand a shift away from nuclear power after an earthquake and tsunami sparked the world's worst atomic crisis since Chernobyl a quarter-century ago.

Braving spring drizzle, thousands of demonstrators gathered at a park in Tokyo's Shibuya district, many holding hand-made banners reading: "Nuclear is old!" and "We want a shift in energy policy!"

The protest came a day after Prime Minister Naoto Kan called a halt to operations at a nuclear plant southwest of Tokyo because it is near a tectonic faultline, fearing a disaster like that which hit the Fukushima Daiichi plant in March.



Broadcasters estimate 10,000 people joined the anti-nuclear demo in Tokyo (AFP, Yoshikazu Tsuno)

"I'm happy to see the prime minister finally taking action," said protester Manami Inoue, 28, who had a black and yellow "No" sign around her neck.

"But I want to know when the plant will really stop operations," she said.

Fellow demonstrator Shinji Matsushita, 59, said: "I feel so frustrated because no politicians have made their stance clear -- whether they are for nuclear or against nuclear.

"They keep saying nuclear is dangerous but never say they are against it."

More than 10,000 people gathered for the demonstration, public broadcaster NHK said, after organisers spread the word through online social networks.

Kan said Friday he was ordering the suspension of operations at the Hamaoka plant 200 kilometres (125 miles) from the capital while a higher sea wall was built and other measures taken to guard against quake and tsunami damage.

Local media said the suspension would be for about two years.

Seismologists have long warned a major quake is overdue in the Tokai region where the ageing Hamaoka plant is located, while anti-nuclear campaigners argue the seismically unstable area makes Hamaoka the most dangerous atomic facility in the quake-prone archipelago.

Resource-poor Japan, highly dependent on Middle Eastern oil, meets about one third of its energy needs with nuclear power.

The ruling party has said it would review government energy policy after the stricken Fukushima plant leaked radiation into air, soil and sea and forced the evacuation of 85,000 people living near the plant. But it said it would not abandon nuclear power.

Major Japanese newspapers largely welcomed the move by Kan, although he does not have a legally binding power to stop a running nuclear reactor, urging the operator of the Hamaoka plant to accept his decision.

"It is difficult to explain to the international community why the Hamaoka plant, which is considered to be 'the most dangerous' continues operating," said the liberal Asahi Shimbun newspaper in its Saturday editorial.

The Mainichi Shimbun newspaper also said: "We would like to see the government never to lower its vigilance also over other nuclear plants."

The conservative Yomiuri Shimbun daily said: "Chubu Electric Power Co. should accept the prime minister's request."

But Chubu Electric Power, which held a board meeting on Saturday, put off its decision about what course of action it should take after Kan's announcement.

The Nikkei business daily expressed concerns for a possible power shortage in the region, where major manufacturers are located, including Toyota.

"Can we keep the impact on the society and industry as small as possible? The government has the responsibility to explain to the citizens based on the actual condition of power supply," it said.