Minister: Japan must quickly phase out nuke energy

The Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's industry minister said the country must give up nuclear power plants as soon as possible because they pose too much risk in one of the world's most earthquake-prone countries.

Yukio Edano said last year's meltdowns after a tsunami hit the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant showed that nuclear power's cost is too high. He expressed the opinion in his new book of policy views that hit stores Saturday.

Edano, who served top government spokesman during the height of the nuclear crisis last year, said he came to the conclusion after seeing "what was believed to be masterpiece of modern technology succumb to natural disaster so easily."

"Now I want to eliminate nuclear power plants as soon as possible," he wrote in the book, "Even if I get a beating, I must say this."

Japan, whose land is the size of California with the population of 128 million, "is not fit to hold the risk of nuclear power plants," he said.

Massive radiation leaks from the Fukushima Dai-ichi contaminated land, trees and crops around the plant, forcing more than 100,000 people to leave their homes and making some areas uninhabitable for years. The plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co, burdened with massive cost of cleanup and compensation, had to be nationalized.

Edano, however, said nuclear energy cannot be eliminated overnight. The process takes a difficult task to fight "counteraction" and face "debts" that nuclear energy has produced.

The most serious problem is spent fuel buildup at each plant as well as an additional storage at a fuel reprocessing plant in Aomori prefecture, northern Japan. The country lacks plans about what to do with the highly radioactive waste.

Japan's government adopted a plan this month to phase-out nuclear energy by 2040. The plan leaves out many details unclear, including what to do with waste buildup or how best to promote green energy, prompting criticism that the government backed down due to pressure from businesses and communities that depend on the nuclear industry.

Plans to abandon nuclear energy means that the Rokkasho fuel recycling operation won't be needed. Fearing a possibility of their region becoming a final waste dump site, officials and residents in Aomori have threatened to send thousands of tons of

spent fuel at the Rokkasho plant back to where they came from. Edano said such a move would immediately fill up storage space at most of Japan's 17 nuclear plants and make them inoperable. He urged big electricity users in major cities to think seriously about the pressing issue and share the burden and cost.

Edano also stressed the need to end the monopoly in the power industry to help promote renewable energy and speed up nuclear phase-out. He told reporters Friday that further details would be decided by a new industry minister after a Cabinet reshuffle expected next week.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, who was re-elected last year as head of his ruling party, is expected to make minor changes to his Cabinet lineup Monday.

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