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Japan's New DPJ Government, the Environment and the Future of the Construction State

Kyodo News Agency

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In the wake of the DPJ landslide victory and the first decisive defeat of a reigning Japanese government in more than half a century, attention has focused on two signature issues of the Hatoyama administration:

• The U.S-Japan and China-Japan Relations and the possibility of a more independent Japanese foreign policy.
• The critique of neoliberalism and the possibility of economic and social policies more effectively addressing Japan's troubled economy and growing intra-societal divisions.

Less attention has been paid to environmental issues and their intersect with policies associated with the construction state pioneered by the Liberal Democratic Party over half a century. Yet these policies also have profound implications for Japan's economic future.

Among the first areas in which DPJ priorities have signaled a policy shift, are two critical environmental issues with far-reaching implications. First is the decision to halt the Yamba Dam, a project emblematic of the construction state that has been pressed by successive governments since 1952 in the face of entrenched local opposition in a mountain community. The second is the decision to postpone reopening of the trouble-plagued Rokkasho Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing Plant, with important implications for the future of Japanese nuclear power. The discussion of the two issues provides important clues to the emerging priorities—and challenges—that the new government will face.

The historic election victory by the Democratic Party has cast doubt on the controversial Y460bn ($5bn) Yamba Dam project that has dominated local lives of residents of Kawarayu Hot Spring for the past half century. With the DPJ committed to shifting funds from largescale infrastructure construction projects to popular welfare and child allowances, the dam, in the making for decades in the face of local opposition, now appears to be doomed.

Indeed, on September 17, 2009, the first day in office for the new government, Land Minister Maehara Seiji announced that the partially constructed dam, located in Gumma prefecture, would be canceled.

As Mure Dickie observed, "Yamba Dam now appears set to be not just a test of the DPJ's determination to stick by its manifesto, but also of its ability to overcome obstruction from other layers of government and the bureaucracy while minimising the disruption caused to citizens with little experience of changes of government."

Test Run of Rokkasho Spent Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing Plant Extended Again

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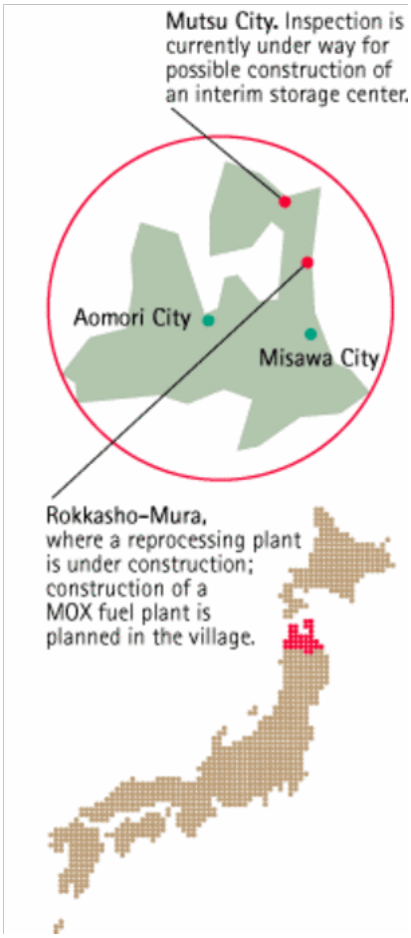
AOMORI -- Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. plans to extend the trial operation of its spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in northeastern Japan again for more than a year, power industry and local government sources said Friday.



Japan Nuclear Fuel, which operates Japan's sole commercial-basis reprocessing plant in the village of Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, on the northern tip of the country's main island of Honshu, has informed Aomori prefectural government officials of the plan, the sources said.

The company is expected to formally file reports on the schedule change with the central, Aomori prefectural and Rokkasho village governments as early as Monday, the sources said.

The schedule change was caused mainly by a series of problems at the spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant, they said.

Among the problems were leaks of highly radioactive waste liquids at the reprocessing plant in January. No cleaning work has been done at the plant since March because of equipment trouble.

Rokkasho radioactive waste disposal center

This would be the eighth time Japan Nuclear Fuel has extended the trial operation of the reprocessing plant since it began running the facility on a trial basis in March 2006.

On Friday, Japan Nuclear Fuel said it has yet to decide when to complete the trial operation.

The Rokkasho spent nuclear reprocessing plant is a key facility to establish a nuclear fuel cycle infrastructure in Japan and to use plutonium-uranium mixed oxide (MOX) as fuel at the country's nuclear power plants.

Rokkasho spent fuel receiving storage area

Originally, the company planned to spend about a year and a half on the trial operation of the facility. But more than three years have already passed since the launch of the test run.

Protesters challenge Rokkasho

The delay in the completion of the test run of the Rokkasho plant would not affect electric power companies' plans to use MOX fuel at their reactors, the sources said.

The Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan has already announced a decision to put off for five years a plan to use MOX fuel at 16-18 nuclear reactors across the country by fiscal 2010 beginning in April that year.

On Friday, Kyushu Electric Power Co. said it will begin checkups Sunday at a Saga Prefecture nuclear power reactor, where so-called pluthermal power generation is planned to start for the first time in Japan this fall.

The company will begin to use MOX fuel for the reactor in Genkai in early October before the start of generation slated for later in the month. The MOX fuel, produced in France, arrived at the Genkai plant in May.

Kyodo News Agency August 28, 2009.

Recommended citation: Kyodo News Agency, "Japan's New DPG Government, the Environment and the Future of the Construction State," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 37-2-09, September 14, 2009.

Created by Datamomentum