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German nuclear dispute sharpened by Japan mishap

Saturday, March 12, 2011



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 Participants of an anti nuclear demonstration form a huma...

(03-12) 08:58 PST BERLIN, Germany (AP) --

Thousands of people demonstrated on Saturday against plans to extend the life of Germany's nuclear power stations, as an explosion at a Japanese nuclear power plant sharpened a long-running dispute over the technology's future in the country.

Organizers said tens of thousands formed a human chain between the Neckarwestheim nuclear plant and the southwestern city of Stuttgart, which are 28 miles (45 kilometers) apart_ some waving yellow flags with the slogan "Nuclear power — no thanks." Police didn't immediately give a figure.

The demonstration was planned long before the post-earthquake blast at Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, but the fears of possible disaster gave an added focus to opponents of the technology in Germany.

Saturday's explosion destroyed a building housing the reactor, but a radiation leak was decreasing, officials in Japan said.

Germany's government last year decided to extend the life of its 17 nuclear plants for an average 12 extra years. A previous government had said it wanted them all shut by 2021.

While Germany — unlike some of its European Union partners — has no plans to build any new plants, the extension was divisive.

The mishap in Japan, which comes two weeks before a closely fought state election in the region where Saturday's protest was held, prompted new criticism from the opposition.

Events at Fukushima "show that, even in a high-tech country like Japan that is equipped for all eventualities, nuclear power is an uncontrollable, highly dangerous, risky technology," the leadership of the opposition Greens said in a statement.

Matthias Miersch, a lawmaker with the main opposition Social Democrats, urged the government to scrap immediately the decision to extend German nuclear plants' lives. The third opposition party, the Left Party, called for a worldwide moratorium on expanding nuclear power capacity.

Nuclear energy has been unpopular in Germany since an explosion at a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986, sent a cloud of radiation over much of Europe.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, however, has argued that Germany needs to keep nuclear energy for now as a "bridging technology" until it has developed more renewable power sources.

Her deputy, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, on Saturday pushed aside questions about the government's nuclear policy.

With thousands likely dead or missing in Japan, "Germany's first answer can't be that ... a political argument breaks out here because there are state election campaigns going on," he said.

Merkel's center-right coalition faces a tight battle to keep control of the regional government in Baden-Wuerttemberg in a March 27 election, and two other votes also are looming.

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