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France's Sarkozy announces \$1.43-billion nuclear investment

Despite safety issues, the French president says there is 'no alternative' to atomic power.

By Kim Willsher, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a \$1.43-billion investment in atomic power Monday, going against Europe's antinuclear tide following the Fukushima disaster in Japan.

Despite growing safety concern among neighboring countries, Sarkozy said abandoning the development and building of new nuclear reactors made no sense. "There is no alternative to nuclear energy today," he told reporters.

Sarkozy also promised "substantial resources" to strengthen research into nuclear safety and a further \$1.85-billion investment in renewable energy sources, including solar and wind power.

The announcement came as Germany drew up plans to shut all 17 of its nuclear stations by 2022, bowing to concerns about the safety of atomic power after the earthquake and tsunami that damaged the Fukushima Daiichi plant in March, releasing radioactivity into the environment.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in May that Germany would concentrate on renewable energy. "We want to end the use of nuclear energy and reach the age of renewable energy as fast as possible," Merkel said.

Another of France's neighbors, Switzerland, has decided not to replace the four nuclear power plants that supply about 40% of the country's electricity. The last of Switzerland's power nuclear plants is expected to end production by 2034, leaving time for the country to develop alternative power sources.

In Italy, a proposal by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to restart the country's nuclear energy program, abandoned the 1980s, was rejected by 94% of voters in a referendum this month.

France has 58 nuclear reactors, which supply 74% of the country's electricity, and it is the world's largest net exporter of electricity from nuclear sources. Sarkozy said France was known to be "considerably ahead" of other countries in terms of atomic power technology and safety.

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"Our power stations are more expensive because they are safer," he said.

The French Nuclear Safety Authority is carrying out an audit of nuclear installations to examine the risks of flood, earthquake and loss of power and cooling, as well as emergency accident procedures.

All 143 working nuclear power plants in the European Union's 27 member states are facing new safety tests in the wake of the Fukushima disaster.

Willsher is a special correspondent.

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