Japan PM Wants Less Reliance on Nuclear Power

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TOKYO (AP) — Japan's prime minister said Wednesday he wants his country to learn from its ongoing crisis and become less reliant on nuclear energy.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan told a news conference that the risks are too high and renewable energy sources such as solar, wind and biomass should eventually replace nuclear as a new pillar of Japan's energy supply, along with conservation.

"We should seek a society that does not rely on nuclear energy," Kan said. "We should gradually and systematically reduce reliance on nuclear power and eventually aim at a society where people can live without nuclear power plants."

Japan's nuclear strategy has come under intense scrutiny since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami touched off leaks, explosions and meltdowns at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant northeast of Tokyo.

Kan said he used to believe that nuclear energy could be useful as long as ample safety measures are taken, but the recent crisis forced him to change his view.

"As I've experienced the March 11 accident, I came to realize the risk of nuclear energy is too intense," Kan said. "It involves technology that cannot be controlled by our conventional concept of safety."

Kan denied he was proposing an immediate abandonment of nuclear energy policy. He did not give any details how Japan should phase out nuclear dependency while increasing the weight of alternative energy sources.

Kan gave no timetable for restarting 35 idle nuclear power reactors, including those shut down in the wake of the tsunami-triggered crisis and others undergoing regular inspections.

The government has ordered safety checks on all of Japan's 54 nuclear reactors after the disaster — the worst nuclear crisis since Chernobyl. Only 19 reactors are currently operating, causing electricity shortages amid sweltering heat.

But recently, the government has added another hurdle — new tests known as "stress tests" to examine whether reactors can withstand big earthquakes, tsunami and other risks.

Nuclear power generates about 30 percent of Japan's electricity. If nuclear reactors currently shut for maintenance were delayed in resuming operations, the country could face a power shortfall in the months ahead.

Kan has said that Japan will scrap an earlier plan to boost nuclear dependency to half of Japan's energy needs by 2030.

With the loss of the Fukushima plant, which used to supply power to Tokyo areas, the government recently imposed energy restrictions on companies, factories and shopping malls to cope with the power crunch.

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