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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

BUSINESS | MARCH 25, 2011

Top Nuclear Aide Sees No Slowing of Sector

By NORIHIKO SHIROUZU

TOKYO—A top official at Japan's nuclear-safety regulatory agency sees no slowing in the country's campaign to expand atomic power, despite the battle to contain the world's worst nuclear crisis in 25 years, saying in an interview that the alternative is "blackouts."

The Battle for Fukushima Daiichi



Reuters

Tepco workers record the status of instruments in a control room at the Fukushima Daiichi plant Wednesday.

"There aren't that many easy alternatives available for us," said Hidehiko Nishiyama, a former trade negotiator tapped to help deal with the Fukushima nuclear crisis, on Wednesday. "Japan couldn't go forward without nuclear power in order to meet its demand for energy today," he said. About 30% of Japan's electricity output comes from nuclear, and the government has set the goal of increasing that to 40% by 2020.

The 54-year-old career bureaucrat—who has emerged over the past two weeks as the public face of the government's efforts to calm a jittery global public—said industry is likely to face severe opposition to expanding reliance on nuclear power, especially as reports of the fallout intensify, with news Wednesday that Tokyo tap water had been contaminated.

But a significant curb in nuclear power would mean rampant blackouts, he warned. "I don't think anyone could imagine life without electricity," Mr. Nishiyama said in the 40-minute session. "Realistically, we need to come up with nuclear power stations that could withstand severe accidents," such as the earthquake and tsunami that threw the Fukushima Daiichi plant in northeastern Japan into a crisis. He said Japan and its nuclear-power industry need to find a solution to make reactors' backup power and cooling systems more resilient to such events.



Associated Press

Hidehiko Nishiyama, who has emerged as the public face of Japan's efforts to calm nuclear fears, in Tokyo on March 14.

Radiation Levels in Japan



That view mirrors Mr. Nishiyama's position as a top official in a bureaucracy—a director-general at Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry—that both

The Japanese government monitors radiation levels around the country. Track these measurements over time.

regulates and promotes the nuclear-power industry.

Tearful Reunions After the Quake



AFLO/Zuma Press

The trade ministry, known as METI, has in recent months been revving up a push to help Japanese power companies win deals to build nuclear reactors abroad, as part of a larger effort to market Japan's "infrastructure technologies," such as nuclear energy and high-speed trains, aggressively overseas.

Mr. Nishiyama said Wednesday his agency—Japan Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency—"remains steadfastly independent" from the larger trade and industry ministry. He said Japan, as a country, has made sure of NISA's independence by setting up a second agency attached to the cabinet named the Nuclear Safety Commission.

"With this disaster we are faced with today, nobody's saying it happened because NISA is guilty of collusion with Tepco," Mr. Nishiyama said, referring to Fukushima operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. "We think this 'double-check' mechanism we have set up to maintain a healthy regulatory environment with the second safety agency is working just fine."

Tepco continued to report progress this week in restoring order at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors, but Mr. Nishiyama said it was still "uncertain" whether the company, whose efforts have been helped by Japan's Self-Defense Forces and fire departments from Tokyo and other cities, is going to be able to finish the job quickly.

"We think we are making good progress...and we are no longer faced with constant and persistent uncertainties," he said. "But we are not in a position to say how close we are to declaring victory."

Indeed, as the interview ended and Mr. Nishiyama escorted a reporter out into the hallway, an aide grabbed his sleeve and said, with an alarmed look on his face: "There's smoke rising at No. 3," a reference to one of the six reactors at the troubled complex.

The No. 3 reactor suffered an explosion on March 14, three days after the magnitude 9.0-earthquake and tsunami hit the complex. The explosion blew up much of the exterior of the reactor building. A plume of smoke has been seen rising from the reactor intermittently ever since. Wednesday's flare-up forced a quick evacuation of the workers at the reactors, as officials said they weren't sure of the cause.

Mr. Nishiyama walked away, briskly, without saying good-bye and disappeared into a room.

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