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Clinton pledges Japan support, TEPCO pledges shutdown

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By [Chisa Fujioka](#) and [Matt Spetalnick](#)

TOKYO (Reuters) - Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Japan Sunday to remain active on the world stage and pledged support for Washington's key ally in East Asia as the operator of a stricken nuclear plant finally set out a timeline to shut it down.

Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) said it hoped to achieve a cold shutdown of the plant that was crippled in the March 11 quake and tsunami -- effectively making the reactors safe and stable -- within six to nine months.

"Economically, diplomatically and in so many other ways, Japan is indispensable to global problem-solving," Clinton told a news conference after talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto. "And the U.S.-Japan alliance is as indispensable as ever to global security and progress."

Clinton also said Japan and the United States had agreed to create a "public-private partnership for reconstruction" under the guidance of Japan's government, and that U.S. firms and organizations would begin discussing how they can support Japan as it comes through the crisis.

Soon after she spoke, TEPCO gave a briefing outlining its plan to bring the plant to cold shutdown.

Even if the operator does manage to do that within six to nine months, Japan hinted Sunday that a full recovery was likely to take longer.

"The first juncture toward safety would be when the fuel rods are fully submerged in water and a cold shut down is achieved," said Banri Kaieda, Japan's economics minister.

"But true safety will not come until the fuel rods are removed from the reactors," Kaieda told a news conference on Sunday.

Kaieda also said he advised TEPCO not to dump contaminated water, no matter how low the radiation level, into the ocean in future.

The operator's decision earlier this month to pump water contaminated with low levels of radiation had raised the ire of Japan's neighbors China and South Korea.

Clinton arrived in Japan, which is still reeling from the triple disaster nearly five weeks later, on the final leg of a global trek that took her to Berlin for NATO talks on the Libya conflict and to Seoul to tackle the North Korean nuclear stand-off and boost trade talks with another key ally in Asia.

The still rising death toll from the quake and tsunami has topped 13,000. The natural disaster and the nuclear crisis that followed have seriously rattled the world's third-largest economy.

Damages from the quake and tsunami have been estimated at \$300 billion, making it the world's costliest natural disaster.

Washington has deployed thousands of troops plus military aircraft and navy ships to help with relief work in the devastated northeastern part of the island nation.

Clinton, during her 5-hour stop, said there was no reason for Americans to stay away from Japan, other than the area around the nuclear plant.

"We have encouraged businesses and other Americans to go on with their normal lives and to travel to Japan for business and other reasons," she said.

Clinton is the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit in a gesture of solidarity with Japan since it was engulfed in its worst crisis since World War Two.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan has insisted the nuclear situation is slowly stabilizing and the country must now focus on recovery from the 9.0-magnitude quake and the tsunami it unleashed.

"I believe ... this difficult period will provide us with a precious window of opportunity to secure the 'Rebirth of Japan'," Kan wrote in an editorial in the online version of Sunday's International Herald Tribune newspaper.

He said Japan would remain internationally engaged while it recovers from the disasters.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC PILLAR



In the meantime, Washington is concerned about harm to the economic health of a key trading partner and a pillar of the global economy.

Japan's economics minister warned last week that the damage was likely to be worse than first thought as power shortages would cut factory output and disrupt supply chains. The Bank of Japan governor said the economy was in a "severe state," while central bankers were uncertain when efforts to rebuild the northeast would boost growth.

Japan's nuclear disaster has also raised concern in the United States about President Barack Obama's push for expanded nuclear energy to help wean Americans off their dependence on foreign oil.

Neighboring China and South Korea have become increasingly alarmed over the risk of radiation spreading from Japan, and several countries have banned or restricted food imports.

Japanese voters last weekend vented their anger at the government's handling of the nuclear and humanitarian crisis, with Kan's ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) losing nearly 70 seats in local elections.

A fragile political detente with opposition parties has already collapsed and Sunday, one of Kan's chief rivals in the DPJ, Ichiro Ozawa, hinted he would vote in favor of a no-confidence motion against Kan, according to the Mainichi newspaper.

Kan was already under pressure to step down before the March 11 disasters, although any no confidence motion would need the support of more than 70 MPs from his own party.

(Additional reporting by [Taiga Uranaka](#), and [Linda Sieg](#); Writing by Shinichi Saoshiro and Linda Sieg; Editing by [David Chance](#) and [Andrew Marshall](#))

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