

Asia's nuclear drive on despite Japan crisis

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Graphic showing existing and planned nuclear reactors around Asia.

Asian governments that are ramping up nuclear power will face huge pressure to curb their programmes in the wake of Japan's atomic crisis, but dozens of reactors will still be built in the near future.

In China alone, where 27 nuclear reactors are under construction and 50 more are planned, authorities have said they will push on with their atomic energy efforts despite a potential radiation disaster in Japan.

"The plan and determination for developing nuclear power in China will not change," China's vice minister of environmental protection, Zhang Lijun, said at the weekend.

Asia has led the world's nuclear renaissance in recent years as countries in the region have looked for ways to power their booming economies

while lessening their dependency on imported [fossil fuels](#).

Of the 62 reactors being built around the world, 40 are in Asia, according to the World Nuclear Association.

Aside from China, the association said the major players are India and [South Korea](#), each with five reactors already under construction, and about 25 more planned between them.

South Korea indicated this week it remained determined to pursue its domestic atomic ambitions, and would also press on with efforts to export its technology.

"South Korea has the top level of nuclear power plants in terms of safety and efficiency, and they will become a good model in the Middle East," South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak said Monday while in the [United Arab Emirates](#).

Authorities in Vietnam, which has plans to put eight nuclear plants into operation over the next 20 years, said they were similarly unfazed.

"I don't think the incident in Japan will have any impact on the nuclear power development plans in Vietnam," Vuong Huu Tan, head of the state-linked Vietnam Nuclear Energy Institute, told Dow Jones Newswires.

Nevertheless the deepening crisis in Japan, where authorities are scrambling to prevent a meltdown at reactors damaged by last week's catastrophic earthquake and tsunami, will likely curb parts of Asia's historic atomic drive.

The Japanese concerns focus on a plant at Fukushima, 250 kilometres (155 miles) northeast of Tokyo, which has begun leaking radiation at

levels dangerous to human health with four of its six reactors in trouble.

Environment groups have sought to use the Japanese events as proof of the perils of nuclear energy, and governments as well as people in Asia are taking notice, Singapore Institute of International Affairs chairman Simon Tay said.

"The scare factor is huge," Tay told AFP.

"Everyone regards the Japanese as the most careful people in Asia. If they can't safeguard their reactors, it will certainly spike the safety concerns in the region."

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Monday ordered safety checks on the country's existing 20 reactors, while China's Zhang said even his country could "learn lessons" from the Japanese crisis.

Meanwhile, some countries in the region that are tentatively looking at embarking on an atomic energy programme have indicated the events in Japan are a reason to pause.

"Thailand is now studying these matters but what happened in Japan probably affects the decision whether to build nuclear plants in Thailand," Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva told reporters on Sunday.

Thailand, which was badly hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, has a provisional plan to build five nuclear plants.

In neighbouring Malaysia, which is looking to build two nuclear plants, authorities sought to highlight the fact that it would be at least a decade before the facilities would be completed.

"We have time to carry out a thorough study, it will take time to conduct such study and the government will not do it secretly without informing the public," Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Peter Chin Fah Kui said.

In Australia, where the Japanese crisis has reinvigorated a long-running debate about embracing nuclear power, Prime Minister Julia Gillard said her ruling Labor Party would not pursue atomic energy.

In Bangladesh, which has signed a deal with Russia for two nuclear power plants, authorities said they were monitoring events in Japan closely but that they would pursue their plans.

"Our reactors will be third generation and they will be able to withstand even the most powerful earthquake," Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission chairman Farid Uddin Ahmed told AFP.

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