Fukushima 'unprecedented challenge': new Japan PM

December 29 2012, by Karyn Poupee

The No. 3 reactor building at Fukushima pictured in May this year. The clean-up at Fukushima after its tsunami-sparked nuclear meltdowns is unlike anything humanity has ever undertaken, Japan's prime minister said on Saturday during a tour of the plant.

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"The massive work toward decommissioning is an unprecedented

challenge in human history," the newly-elected Shinzo Abe said. "Success in the decommissioning will lead to the reconstruction of Fukushima and Japan."

Abe was at the crippled Fukushima Daiichi just days after being sworn in following the electoral triumph of his pro-business Liberal Democratic Party.

The prime minister's trip to the still-ruined site, on which he was accompanied by an AFP journalist, is part of a push by his administration to put a lid on the crisis.

Observers widely expect Japan to restart its nuclear programme on the LDP's watch, despite public concerns that the party was partially responsible for the extent of the catastrophe because of a culture of complicity during its more than five-decade rule.

His government said Thursday it would review a pledge by the previous administration to scrap nuclear power within three decades and would give the green light to power plants deemed safe by regulators.

The rear of the No. 4 reactor building at Fukushima, pictured in May this year. The massive work toward decommissioning Fukushima is an unprecedented challenge in human history, newly-elected Shinzo Abe said on Saturday. "Success in the decommissioning will lead to the reconstruction of Fukushima and Japan."

Experts have warned, however,that a number of reactors are sitting above what could be still-active faults in the earth's crust, making them vulnerable to quakes.

Underlining Japan's sometimes precarious position at the meeting point of continental plates, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake hit off the Fukushima coast mid afternoon, US geologists said.

A spokesman for plant operator TEPCO said no abnormalities were reported.

Japan's entire stable of 50 reactors was shuttered for inspections in the aftermath of the March 2011 disaster at Fukushima, where a tsunami swamped cooling systems, sparking meltdowns.

Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (C) inspects the Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) emergency operation center inside the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Ota, on December 29, 2012. The clean-up at Fukushima after its tsunami-sparked nuclear meltdowns is an "unprecedented challenge," Abe told workers during a tour of the plant.

The reactors at the plant raged out of control for months after the initial catastrophe, spewing radiation over a wide area and forcing the

evacuation of tens of thousands of people.

Abe's visit comes around a year after experts said they had brought the wrecked units under control. However, melted fuel remains inside their cores and their full decommissioning and cleaning-up is expected to take decades.

Dressed in a protective suit and wearing a face mask, Abe was taken by bus to see two of the damaged reactors.

He thanked workers for their efforts at a time when many Japanese are celebrating New Year with family.

"Decommissioning work is hard work, but it is progressing. We owe it all to you," he told them.

The disaster at Fukushima was the worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl in 1986. Efforts to clean up the site in Ukraine are continuing, more than a quarter of a century after a reactor exploded.

Before Fukushima, Japan had relied on nuclear power for around a third of its electricity and there was little debate about its merits.

Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addresses workers at the Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) emergency operation center inside the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Ota, on December 29, 2012. The clean-up at Fukushima after its tsunami-sparked nuclear meltdowns is an 'unprecedented challenge,' Abe told workers during a tour of the plant.

The meltdowns generated fierce opposition nationwide, sending tens of thousands of people onto the streets.

Critics said lax oversight by regulators, who appeared to have the interests of power companies at heart, had exacerbated the impact of the accident.

Fukushima operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) admitted earlier this year that it had not carried out upgrade and repair work at the site because it wanted to avoid alarming people.

The strong vein of anti-atomic sentiment did not translate into success at the ballot box earlier this month for parties championing an end to nuclear power.

Abe's LDP won a healthy majority, despite being widely viewed as the most pro-nuclear option on offer.

Speaking to press in Kawauchi, a city to which residents have been allowed to return because of falling levels of radiation, Abe was guarded on the future of nuclear power.

He said he wanted "a responsible energy policy" and pledged to boost alternative energy and renewables as his government worked out the best energy mix for Japan.

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