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Protesters shouted slogans Friday against nuclear power in Japan, at a rally in front of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's official residence in Tokyo.

Japan's Premier Seeks Support for Using Nuclear Power

By MARTIN FACKLER

TOKYO — In a rare personal appeal on national television, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda asked for his nation's support on Friday in restarting the first of Japan's idled nuclear plants, saying that keeping the plants offline could cause blackouts and economic chaos at a time when the country's struggling economy can least afford it.

That Mr. Noda took his case to the public on such a crucial issue, rather than setting policy behind closed doors, is a testament to the deep public distrust gripping the nation since last year's nuclear disaster and the government's playing down of the risks it posed. Despite increasingly dire warnings about the economic effects of a sudden turn from nuclear energy, a majority of Japanese remain unconvinced that it is safe to turn the plants back on.

In the 10-minute speech, Mr. Noda spoke in stark terms, saying he had concluded that Japan could not maintain its current living standards without nuclear power, at least in the short term. Responding to the commonly heard argument that Japan is getting along fine without the plants, he said that conservation measures would not be enough in the steamy summer months to overcome the loss of the nation's nuclear plants, which before last year's accident supplied almost a third of Japan's electricity.

He also cited national security, saying Japan needed nuclear power to avoid relying too heavily on oil and natural gas from the politically volatile Middle East. "Cheap and reliable electricity are essential for supporting prosperous and decent livelihoods," Mr. Noda said. "Japanese society cannot function if we stop or try to do without nuclear power generation."

The need to import more oil and gas to make up for the shortfall has been cited as a major factor behind Japan

posting its first yearly trade deficit in more than three decades.

Mr. Noda promised better oversight, saying he hoped to restart the first plant in the western town of Ohi quickly, but that he would not restart others until their safety measures had been thoroughly reviewed. His administration has already deemed the Ohi plant safe and considers it a test case for whether the public will tolerate at least some of the 50 idled commercial reactors being brought back into operation.

The restart issue has polarized Japan for months now, as the country's still-functioning reactors went offline, one by one, for regular maintenance. In the uproar that followed the triple meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, the government had said it would not restart the reactors without local approval, but officials did not anticipate the depth of public skepticism about the government's ability to oversee the politically powerful nuclear industry.

That skepticism was given a powerful voice in recent months, as the upstart mayor of Japan's third-largest city, Osaka, became the country's most popular politician seemingly overnight by demanding more transparency on the nuclear issue and more caution in restarting plants.

Still, many Japanese share Mr. Noda's worry that power shortages could cost jobs and accelerate the nation's industrial decline, driving more businesses abroad.

For weeks, his government has been trying to persuade local leaders to allow a restart of the Ohi plant, which provides power to the heavily urbanized Kansai region, including the cities of Osaka and Kyoto. He has said he wants to restart that plant first because Kansai faces the most severe potential electricity shortages in Japan during the summer, when air-conditioner use surges. The area is also the home to Japan's struggling electronics industry.



JUNKO KIMURA/ZUMA PRESS, VIA BLOOMBERG NEWS

Mr. Noda spoke to reporters on Friday about restarting nuclear plants.

The threat of rolling blackouts seems to have persuaded most local leaders to accept at least a temporary restart of the Ohi plant. The Fukui prefectural government, which has been very supportive of nuclear power in the past, is expected to make a decision as early as next week to approve the restart.

However, the mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, who recently agreed to allowing the plant to operate for the summer, has said he may ask that it be turned off again in September, saying he is against a permanent restart until Japan revamps its nuclear oversight.

"Restarting the Ohi plant will solve the problem for now, but it still leaves open the question of what happens in September," said Hiroshi Tasaka, a nuclear policy expert at Tama University in Tokyo who advised the previous prime minister, Naoto Kan. "There may be a political showdown if Prime Min-

ister Noda tries to keep the plant on, or restarts other plants, without strengthening regulatory oversight."

After his speech, about 1,000 people demonstrated outside the prime minister's office in central Tokyo, chanting "We oppose restarts" and "Protect our children." In recent polls, including one conducted earlier this week, about two-thirds of Japanese said they opposed immediate restarting of the nation's plants.

In his speech, Mr. Noda sought to address some of those concerns by explaining measures his government was taking to avoid a repeat of last year's accident, which was caused when a huge earthquake and tsunami knocked out cooling systems at Fukushima Daiichi.

The main step, he said, was overhauling Japan's current regulatory oversight, which he admitted had failed to prevent the Fukushima accident. A series of recent investigations into the causes of the accident have painted a picture of plant operators who hid safety violations, and compliant regulators who sought to save the operators money by ignoring warnings that the plant was vulnerable to tsunamis.

Mr. Noda said his government was moving as quickly as possible to create an independent nuclear regulatory agency. He was responding to criticism that the current watchdog, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, suffers from conflict of interest issues because it is part of the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry, which is charged with promoting the nuclear industry.

He also said the prime minister's office would move quickly to take direct control in the case of a future accident, such as by dispatching a top official to the site of the accident. Critics of the government's handling of the Fukushima accident have said the prime minister at the time, Mr. Kan, was out of touch and too inconsistent during the crucial first days of the accident.