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Kremlin Mending Fences With Japan

By Olga Razumovskaya

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A woman weeping Monday on a road amid rumble that was the city of Natori in Japan's northern Miyagi prefecture, devastated by a quake and tsunami. **Asahi Shimbun**

Building the momentum in repairing ties with Japan, President Dmitry Medvedev scrambled to send energy supplies to the devastated country, three planes were dispatched with humanitarian aid, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov laid flowers at the Japanese Embassy.

As a second explosion rocked a Japanese nuclear power plant just 800 kilometers southeast of Vladivostok, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin played down fears of a global nuclear disaster and insisted that Rosatom would press ahead with plans to build dozens of nuclear power stations.

Japan is mired in what Prime Minister Naoto Kan has described as its toughest crisis since World War II after a massive 9.0-magnitude earthquake shook the country Friday, causing a tsunami and two separate explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant just north of Tokyo.

The official death toll in the disaster rose to 2,800 on Tuesday, but more than 10,000 people are feared dead.

Japan has asked Russia for extra energy after the nuclear incident maimed its energy sector, 30 percent of which relies on nuclear energy, and Medvedev ordered Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin on Monday to maintain close contact with the Japanese and let him know whether any deals were reached.

"I have always been for the comprehensive development of trade and economic ties with Japan," Medvedev said, according to Interfax. "In this situation it is our duty to help."

He said he spoke with the Japanese prime minister by telephone about the additional fuel supplies Monday.

Sechin said Gazprom was preparing shipments of liquefied natural gas. "We are looking into the possibility of increasing supplies, even though there are some issues related to the product being bound by contract," Sechin said.

Medvedev urged Sechin to find a way around the contracts. "Despite this volume being contract-bound, this is a case when partners can meet each other halfway," he said. "This is a big tragedy, and in this case something can be changed in the agreements."

In addition to LNG, Russian companies are ready to supply Japan with coal and about 6,000 megawatts of electric energy, Sechin said. "This week, a SUEK delegation will be in Japan for negotiations," he said.

Putin first discussed the energy issue with Sechin on Saturday.

Russian-Japanese relations have been tense since Medvedev incurred Tokyo's wrath in November by visiting disputed islands that Moscow seized from Japan during the waning days of World War II. Tokyo wants the return of the islands — known as the southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan — and the 65-year dispute has prevented the two countries from signing a peace treaty officially ending World War II.

Tokyo has suggested that the dispute was hampering the growth in economic ties with Russia.

Medvedev made no mention of the two countries' sore spot Monday.

In Tokyo, 79 Russian rescue workers arrived on Monday aboard two aircraft: a helicopter and a cargo jet carrying three vehicles and emergency equipment, the Emergency Situations Ministry said on its web site. The team will be able to work independently in quake-affected areas for two weeks.

Another plane with 50 rescue workers left Moscow on Monday afternoon and was to pick up an additional 25 workers en route to Tokyo. It was followed by a third plane with 25 rescue workers.

Japan has accepted offers for assistance from about 70 countries.

"We are very grateful for the help that has been offered to us and for the condolences that

have been extended to us by Minister Lavrov and the Russian people," said Akira Imamura, a spokesman for the Japanese Embassy in Moscow.

"We hope for an improvement of our relationship" with Russia, Imamura said by telephone.

Lavrov visited the Japanese Embassy to sign a book of condolences and joined well-wishers in laying flowers outside the embassy earlier Monday.

As for Medvedev's efforts to arrange energy supplies, "those are transactions between interested parties, but this is something we welcome," the embassy spokesman said.

Even if contracts between Russia and Japan are renegotiated, the profits that Gazprom might gain from it will be marginal, said Svetlana Grizan, an oil and gas analyst at VTB Capital.

While it is difficult to say what might ultimately happen with the island dispute, the disaster will make it a non-issue for at least the next one to two years, said Alexander Lukin, a Japanese expert at Moscow International Affairs University.

"A country that ends up in a situation like Japan will be distracted from any kinds of political affairs for a while," said Lukin, who directs the university's South Asia and Shanghai Cooperation Organization Research Center and Institute of International Research.

The estimated cost of the disaster so far is $35 billion, or about a third of the 1995 Kobe earthquake, said John Hardy, a foreign-exchange consultant at Saxo Bank, a privately held Danish bank with offices in Tokyo. "But we wouldn't be surprised to see this estimate soar far higher in the coming days," Hardy said in an e-mailed statement.

Russia's second-largest steelmaker Evraz and coal producer Mechel may profit as Japan increases imports to rebuild its infrastructure and buys more fossil fuels to substitute for nuclear power, Vladimir Zhukov, an analyst at Japan's Nomura Holdings, wrote in a note Monday, Bloomberg reported.

Companies selling radiation-checking devices also stand to benefit, with worried customers snapping up Geiger counters in Vladivostok.

"There is an unprecedented demand," a spokeswoman for the company Primtechnopolis told RIA-Novosti. "We are getting so many calls. Customers say they want the Geiger counters considering what is happening in Japan."

She said the cheapest Geiger counter sells for 3,600 rubles ($125).

Radiation levels are at normal levels in the Far East, authorities said.

But Putin, who said he had spoken with the Japanese prime minister by phone, dismissed fears about a global nuclear disaster resulting from the explosions at the Japanese power plant.

"Our experts think that a nuclear explosion that could lead to the destruction of the reactor itself should not take place," Putin said during a trip to Tomsk.

"I repeat: Our information, based on the data we have, is that we do not see a global threat," he said, according to a transcript on the government web site. "Nevertheless, we are continuing to fully monitor the situation."

Putin also said he did not share international jitters about nuclear power. Switzerland announced Monday that it would shelve plans for new nuclear power plants, and Germany suspended work on extending the life of its nuclear power plants.

"No, we do not plan to change our plans," Putin said, referring to Rosatom's intent to construct dozens of nuclear power plants over the next few decades.

But, Putin added, "we, of course, will draw conclusions from what is happening in Japan."

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