

Greens Vow Backlash at Belarus Nuke Plant

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Belarussian environmentalists have reacted with "frustration and outrage" and warned of a public backlash after the country signed a deal on Tuesday with Rosatom to build the country's first nuclear power plant.

"This agreement shows disrespect for the people, their feelings for the victims of nuclear tragedies," said Tatyana Novikova, who serves as executive secretary of the Public Environmental Expertise group monitoring the nuclear plant project and is also a member of the Belarussian Anti-Nuclear Campaign.

The deal to build the 2.4-gigawatt plant was signed as planned late Tuesday by Rosatom chief Sergei Kiriyenko and Belarus Energy Minister Alexander Ozerets, despite the ongoing emergency at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan.

The new plant in Ostrovets in northwest Belarus is scheduled to be completed by 2018 at a

total cost of up to \$9.4 billion, Interfax reported.

Russia has agreed to provide roughly \$6 billion in credit to fund the project. The loan is likely to be finalized within a month, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said at a joint press conference with his Belarussian and Kazakh counterparts in Minsk late Tuesday night.

Kiriyenko said in January that construction at the site near the Lithuanian border would begin in September.

In tacit acknowledgment of growing public unease about nuclear energy following the Fukushima disaster, Putin said the new reactor would be built to higher safety standards than Japanese ones "even though Belarus is not in an earthquake zone."

"Japanese reactors are 40-year-old American technology. We're talking about completely new technologies," Putin said at a meeting with Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, according to a transcript on the Russian government web site.

Novikova told The Moscow Times that in Belarus — which bore the brunt of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and where a large territory is still cordoned off — such promises "looked very ugly, even to technically illiterate people."

"Today, I heard people on the street discussing the events in Japan and the signing of this agreement. The essence of the conversation was that they were very dissatisfied with this decision and consider it very unwise," she said, adding that she expected a "very decisive" public backlash against the deal.

Her comments follow a report released by an alliance of Russian and Belarussian green groups on Monday accusing Rosatom of a culture of corruption and corner-cutting during construction of plants in Russia.

Events in Japan have divided governments over the virtues of nuclear energy.

Russia has insisted that properly maintained and modern stations are safe, while Turkey, Poland, India and China have all reiterated the importance of nuclear to meeting their energy needs.

But European governments have agreed to subject all their nuclear power stations to stress tests. Germany has ordered its oldest reactors shut down. Farther afield, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez on Wednesday ordered a halt to his country's nuclear program.

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