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OPINION: Spent nuclear fuel pools vulnerable to terrorist attacks

By Arjun Makhijani

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Japan has had a sad reminder of radiation damage, in the midst of the most tragic destruction since World War II caused by the earthquake and tsunami. It will be complicated to create a path out of nuclear energy, but should the Japanese people decide on that, some immediate actions would increase safety, reduce costs, and smooth the way.

Reprocessing creates liquid radioactive materials that pose accident dangers that could rival or exceed the Fukushima Daiichi radiation releases so far. The Rokkasho plant is not yet operational. The Monju reactor has a sodium coolant that can catch fire or explode in a severe accident. Rokkasho and Monju contribute nothing to electricity production and can be closed to increased safety. Japan can then phase out nuclear and rebuild a much safer energy sector based on renewable energy, natural gas, hydropower, efficiency, and smart grids.

The United States has reacted to the crisis complacently so far. The spent fuel pools at 104 reactors are vulnerable to terrorist attacks and can have severe accidents. Worst-case damage estimated in 1997 by Brookhaven National Laboratory would be about \$700 billion in today's dollars, and there could be more than 100,000 excess cancer deaths. Yet the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has not ordered dry storage of as much spent fuel as possible to reduce risks. A pause in new reactor licensing and a review of the relicensing procedures for existing reactors would be prudent, but is nowhere in sight.

The United States has more renewable energy than the oil in all OPEC countries put together. It would be terrible if, in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, the United States failed to move to a fully renewable energy economy. I have shown in my book "Carbon-Free and Nuclear-Free" that it is technically and economically feasible. Indeed, the world should revisit "atoms for peace" -- that sought to hide the horror of the bomb behind a peace dove -- and create a renewable path to "energy for peace."

(Arjun Makhijani is president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Takoma Park, the United States.)

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