

Japan nuclear agency urges measures to cut plutonium stocks

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In this file photo, spent nuclear fuel rods are stored in a storage pool at the Rokkasho nuclear fuel reprocessing plant, run by Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. in Rokasho village in Aomori Prefecture, northern Japan. (Source: AP)

Tokyo: Japan's nuclear policy-setting body on Thursday endorsed a call for stricter management of its fuel recycling program to reduce its plutonium stockpile. The annual "nuclear white paper" approved by the Atomic Energy Commission is a response to intensifying pressure from Washington as it pursues denuclearization in North Korea. It says Japan's fuel recycling program should minimize the amount of plutonium extracted from spent fuel for reuse in power generation to eventually reduce the stockpile.

Japan has pledged transparency and pledged not to possess plutonium that does not have a planned use, but the promise increasingly sounds empty because of the slow restarts of Japanese reactors that burn plutonium amid setbacks from the 2011 Fukushima disaster.

Though Japanese officials deny any possible misuse of the material and reprocessing technology, the large stockpile of plutonium that can make atomic bombs also raises security concerns as the U.S. wants North Korea to get rid of its nuclear weapons.

Commission chairman Yoshiaki Oka said Japan's effort to tackle its plutonium stockpile underscores its commitment to a peaceful nuclear program and takes into consideration the importance of maintaining "relationship of trust with the U.S."

The commission is compiling guidelines to better manage and reduce the plutonium stockpile. Measures would include some government oversight in setting a cap on plutonium reprocessing and a study into how to steadily reduce the plutonium processed abroad.

Japan has nearly 47 tons of plutonium, 10 tons at home and the rest in France and Britain, where spent fuel from Japanese nuclear plants has been reprocessed because Japan is not able to reprocess it into plutonium-based MOX fuel at home.

The total amount is enough to make 6,000 atomic bombs, though officials at Japan's Rokkasho reprocessing plant denies any risk of proliferation, saying all plutonium is stored safely and closely monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

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The 368 report says burning plutonium in 16-18 conventional reactors is "the only realistic method" in Japan to effectively consume plutonium. Only about 1 ton of plutonium was burned last year.

- AP