

Was restarting reactor a last resort?

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Wednesday, 07 March 2018 07:51

Opponents of nuclear energy are sure to be dismayed that the Atomic Energy Council on Monday approved the restart of the No. 2 reactor at the Guosheng Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City's Wanli District (萬里).

Technically, there is nothing wrong with the decision, as the reactor's license runs until 2023 and there are still a few years to go before the government's pledge to completely phase out nuclear energy by 2025.

The reactor has been mothballed for 600 days following damage in 2016 and, while the concerns of environmentalists are indeed valid, the council said that it has been monitoring Taiwan Power Co's (Taipower) maintenance of the reactor and would continue to ensure safe operations according to the law.

However, the council was also supposed to be monitoring Taipower's maintenance of the reactor before it broke down two years ago.

Fortunately, disaster was averted that time, but it is an old reactor and humans are doing the monitoring, so some things could go undetected.

Furthermore, things do happen that are completely out of Taipower's control, such as natural disasters or sabotage.

So there is cause for alarm, even if it is just speculation.

The reactor restart also casts doubt on the government's statements, as in August last year, when then-premier Lin Chuan (林揆) "rejected the possibility of restarting inactive nuclear reactors, despite the risk of further power shortages," asking Taipower to "fill the power gap."

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Premier William Lai (賴清德) in November last year said that he would not consider restarting nuclear reactors in the event of an electricity shortage and later in the same news conference said nuclear energy would be the “last resort.”

On Friday last week, Lai said that Taipower’s application to restart the reactor is standard procedure and that it has absolutely nothing to do with the administration’s pledge to establish a “nuclear-free homeland” by 2025.

Asked about electricity shortages, Lai said that “the company’s power generation would undoubtedly be enough to cover this year’s consumption.”

That statement was made three days before the reactor restart was approved.

Lai knew that restarting the reactor would create a huge public backlash regardless of whether it has anything to do with the government’s pledge, and with public distrust of the administration mounting, it makes one question whether things are more serious than Lai makes out and whether the government’s pledge is realistic.

Taipower claims that the reactor is merely being restarted so it can bolster its energy reserves, but is the nation really in a place where the only option was to restart a broken and aging reactor?

Despite the government’s pledge and years of protests against nuclear power, there are also experts who see nuclear energy as a good thing and as the decision to restart the reactor has already been made and technically does not violate the government’s promises, the public can only hope for the best and that nothing catastrophic happens.

The council on Sunday said that Taipower is still looking for a site to store its nuclear waste.

Taiwan is not the US, where there is plenty of land far away enough from settlements to do

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this, and hence it was dumped on the Tao Aborigines on Orchid Island (Lanyu, 蘭嶼) in the 1990s.

The government cannot do something like that again and whatever site Taipower finally chooses it is sure to cause a public outcry.

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