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MY SAY: Stop the nuclear roulette

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MY SAY

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At the time of writing, radiation levels in the seawater near the nuclear reactors at Fukushima Daiichi, shattered by the earthquake and tsunami, were said to be rapidly rising. Tests conducted showed that the radioactive iodine level was 3,355 times higher than in the "normal" sea-water around the plant.

Not only is the relatively fast-decaying io-dine-131 level up, but more worryingly, so is caesium-137. The latter has a half-life of about 30.17 years compared with only eight days for the former. Meantime, the contamination of nearby farm produce and dairy products has led to an import scare in several countries and the evacuation zone around the plant has been widened to 30km.

As efforts continue to contain the volatile uranium-plutonium mix in the core of the reactors, there has been no shortage of allegations about the risks and extent of radioactivity being "downplayed" and of cover-ups and conspiracies. The uranium-plutonium mix is suspected to be already burning its way through the protective shield, leading to several workers suffering from radiation burns and raising even more fears. Exposure to radioactive substances can cause cancer in humans, if not slow death.

Not surprisingly, many countries are getting cold feet and are rethinking the use of nuclear energy within their borders. In Germany — one of the world's technologically advanced economies that champion nuclear power as a source of clean and green energy — Chancellor Angela Merkel ordered seven outdated nuclear reactors to be shut down and set a three-month moratorium on them.

Political support for the country's nuclear industry, which has received €100 billion in government grants, is also said to be dwindling. However, the German energy giants want the lifespan of 17 nuclear plants to be extended and the old reactors to be put back on the grid after safety checks. In fact, the EU's energy commissioner made an unprecedented about-turn, asking Europe whether it could live without nuclear energy.

Adding to the uncertainties is the ghost of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster that spewed 40 times the combined amount of radioactivity from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs in 1945. Despite decades of efforts and hundreds of millions of euros to curb what was then the worst nuclear disaster in history, there is still no satisfactory solution in sight there. The encasements or "sarcophaguses" placed around the Chernobyl nuclear reactors are now old and experts warn of a possible catastrophic amount of radiation being released into the atmosphere if new shields costing many more millions of euros are not put in place soon. But even these might not be a real solution.

At the end of 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming that 2017 would mark the end of a period of recovery and sustainable development in the parts of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia affected by the accident. However, the events in Japan have put a question mark on such ambitions, given that more than 200 tonnes of uranium and one tonne of lethally radioactive plutonium remain in the Chernobyl ruins.

In fact, early last month, Japan had contemplated taking the Chernobyl way by burying the Fukushima reactors in sand and concrete. But according to a source at the plants' operator Tokyo Electric Power Co, "it is impossible to encase the reactors in concrete. Our priority right now is to try and cool them down first".

By now, we should have woken up to the reality that going nuclear is easier said than done. Its dimension is of geologic proportions which no current assessment — environmental or otherwise — can capture with any kind of accuracy. When we are still grappling with issues like solid waste disposal and landfill leachate, how can we possibly deal with the highly toxic waste produced by nuclear plants or even incinerators?

We need to think futuristically, inspired by the mayor of Munich who is determined to make the city of over a million inhabitants the first to be powered totally by renewable energy by2025. By that year, all 750,000 private households in Munich would run on renewable energy.

To be sure, this calls for creative investment in water power, wind parks and solar plants, even in locations outside Germany. This is already happening at Munich's biogas plant, which uses the manure and leftover food from the city zoo to generate biogas.

These "green", carbon-free efforts are definitely less expensive and safer than nuclear power. So, let us vow to keep Malaysia nuclear-free for the future generations.

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