

Pacific islanders condemn Fukushima water plan



Workers in full protective suits and masks during decommissioning work at Fukushima. There is growing concern at Japan's plan to release the water into the ocean [File: Kimimasa Mayama/EPA]

Saipan, February 15 (RHC)-- The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands says there is a viable alternative to Japan's plan to dump more than 1 million tonnes of treated water from the crippled Fukushima nuclear power station into the Pacific Ocean, and it requires urgent consideration.

The wastewater is a product of efforts to cool the nuclear reactors at Fukushima that were badly damaged in the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The Northern Mariana Islands, a United States territory with a population of about 51,659 people, is located only 2,500 km (1,553 miles) southeast of Japan. The islands' leaders have declared that Japan's plan, officially announced last year, is unacceptable.

"The expectation is that the discharge will not happen until 2023. There is time to overturn this decision," Sheila J Babauta, a member of the Northern Mariana Islands's House of Representatives, told Al Jazeera in an interview last month. In December, its government adopted a joint resolution opposing any nation's decision to dispose of nuclear waste in the Pacific Ocean.

"The effort that went into the creation of the joint resolution exposed research and reports from Greenpeace East Asia highlighting alternatives for the storage of Japan's nuclear waste, including the only acceptable option, long-term storage and processing using the best technology available," Babauta said.

Currently, Japan intends to dispose of all the wastewater, which will be treated, over a period of about 30 years. Anxiety is high among local Japanese fishers and coastal communities. And its plan has met with vocal opposition from neighbouring countries, including China, South Korea and Taiwan, as well as Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Islands Forum, the intergovernmental organisation for the region.

"This water adds to the already nuclear polluted ocean. This threatens the lives and livelihoods of islanders heavily reliant on marine resources. These include inshore fisheries as well as pelagic fishes such as tuna. The former provides daily sustenance and food security, and the latter much needed foreign exchange via fishing licences for distant water fishing nation fleets," Vijay Naidu, adjunct professor at the School of Law and Social Sciences at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, told Al Jazeera.

It was the use of the Pacific Islands for nuclear weapons testing by the U.S., the United Kingdom and France from the 1940s to late last century which has driven heated opposition among islanders to any nuclear-related activities in the region.

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