

In France, Japanese Disaster Prompts a Nuclear Safety Audit

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

PARIS — The Fukushima nuclear crisis has prompted anti-nuclear marches across the world, persuaded the Chinese authorities to delay the construction of new reactors and even lost the German government an important state election.

In [France](#), a country that obtains nearly 80 percent of its electricity from [nuclear energy](#), compared with 24 percent in Japan and 19 percent in the United States, there has been conspicuously little reaction. So when the president of the French nuclear safety watchdog stated the obvious on Wednesday — “Nobody can guarantee that there will never be a nuclear accident in France” — it came as something of a shock.

In an open hearing before members of Parliament, André-Claude Lacoste, head of the Nuclear Safety Authority, said France would draw the necessary lessons from the Japanese disaster and upgrade safety procedures across the country. The most urgent task — and one so far neglected, he admitted — is a re-evaluation of the potential impact of natural disasters on nuclear safety, Mr. Lacoste said.

The fact that several natural disasters can occur at the same time, as happened in Japan with the earthquake and the tsunami, “is a subject that until now we didn’t really take into account,” he said, promising a fresh look at the risk that tectonic activity could produce on French territory, particularly along the coast.

Over the last millennium, France has been the site of some 1,700 noticeable earthquakes, geologists estimate. Its nuclear reactors were built to withstand five times the impact of the worst earthquake ever registered here. But with severe flooding incidents and bad weather having intensified in recent years, Mr. Lacoste said the past was not necessarily a good predictor of the future.

“[Climate change](#) is changing the situation,” he said, “Extreme events that so far happened every thousand years along the coast now happen every hundred years.”

Prime Minister [François Fillon](#) ordered a safety audit of the country’s 58 nuclear power plants this month. Nuclear experts will also review their decision to keep a number of plants older than 30 years running and will update accident management procedures, particularly in heavily populated areas around reactor clusters like those near

Dunkerque in northern France. Finally, Mr. Lacoste said, cooling mechanisms will be studied in more detail, not least because their failure at Fukushima has been one of the main ways radioactivity has escaped there so far.

Whatever lessons may be drawn from the current crisis, France is unlikely to turn its back on nuclear energy, a legacy of [Charles de Gaulle](#), the revered former president, that has been broadly embraced by politicians across the political mainstream for decades.

The nuclear industry in France is highly advanced and provides a major source of export revenue. Three French companies — Areva, GDF Suez and Électricité de France — are among the most important players in the sector globally. The state retains large stakes in all three.

In France, E.D.F. operates its 58 nuclear reactors at 19 sites, which is the largest pool of plants globally. It designs, maintains, operates and decommissions plants. It has made significant recent investments in nuclear projects in Britain, the United States and China.

In 2008, France produced 439 terawatt hours of nuclear power, representing 16 percent of global production.

Matthew Saltmarsh contributed reporting.