

Koizumi off to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan on energy quest

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Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi arrived Monday in Astana, the Kazakh capital, on the first leg of a tour in Central Asia aimed at securing energy resources and boosting Japan's presence there.

Koizumi is the first Japanese leader to visit the region. His four-day trip also covers Uzbekistan.

"For our strategy on energy resources, it is not good for Japan to be too dependent on the Middle East. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are blessed with abundant resources," Koizumi said ahead of his departure.

"(But) we must not just be digging for resources and should also think about the environment, such as employing green technologies to enhance efficiency and save energy. I think these are the fields where Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have expectations on Japan for cooperation," he said.

Koizumi was scheduled to meet with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazabayev in Astana. They were to release a joint statement and a memorandum on bilateral cooperation to develop uranium mines in Kazakhstan, which reportedly has the world's second-largest uranium reserves.

Koizumi will continue on to Tashkent on Tuesday and meet with Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

In an Aug. 23 written interview with Kyodo News, Karimov expressed interest in expanding cooperation with Japan on energy research development and supports Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

The trip, one of Koizumi's last overseas visits before stepping down next month, is part of Japan's efforts to seek out more suppliers of natural resources such as uranium, crude oil and gas, given the country's heavy dependence on imports of energy supplies, especially from the Middle East.

The visit will also reflect Japan's eagerness to join the competition among China, Russia and the U.S. to boost their influence in the region.

China and Russia have tried to enhance alliances with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as well

as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan since the six formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001.