

Copyright 2006 Kyodo News Service
All Rights Reserved
Japan Economic Newswire

January 27, 2006

U.S. DEMOCRATS URGE JAPAN TO HALT PLAN TO REPROCESS SPENT NUKE FUEL

WASHINGTON

Six U.S. Democrats have urged Japan to suspend its plan to begin a test operation to extract plutonium at a nuclear-waste reprocessing facility in the village of Rokkasho in Aomori Prefecture, Democratic congressional sources said Thursday.

"We firmly believe that the continued extraction of weapons-usable plutonium poses significant and unnecessary threats to international security and nonproliferation," the six Democrats said in a letter that they sent to Japanese Ambassador to the United States Ryozo Kato.

"To that end, we are writing to encourage you to suspend plans to conduct active testing of Rokkasho in 2006 as part of a broader agreement to postpone operation of the Rokkasho reprocessing plant," says the letter, obtained by Kyodo News.

The six Democratic lawmakers include Edward Markey from Massachusetts, who has expertise in energy policy and nuclear nonproliferation, and Donald Payne from New Jersey.

While pointing out that Japan already has a total plutonium stockpile of more than 40 tons, one of the sources said the test operation at Rokkasho goes against the trend of strengthening the global nonproliferation regimes and would have a negative impact on Iran's nuclear issue.

The lawmakers said in letter that they made the request to Japan "as part of a global initiative to reduce worldwide stockpiles of weapons-usable fissile materials -- highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium."

They also said the suspension "would promote nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, and help prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons."

Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., which runs the reprocessing plant in the northeastern Japanese village, plans to start a test operation to extract plutonium by March so plutonium can be produced as early as the spring.

JNF hopes that the reprocessing plant can produce more than 4 tons of plutonium annually at full operation in the future.

