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Philippines: A Nuclear Plant, and a Dream, Fizzles

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MORONG, the Philippines — It is the nuclear plant of regrets, of would haves and could haves, to a generation of Filipino scientists who had dreamed of bringing nuclear power to this energy-starved country.

The Bataan Nuclear Power Plant here sits about 45 miles west of the nation's capital across Manila Bay, nearly at the tip of a peninsula rich in historical resonance and volcanic activity. Completed in 1984, it seemed destined to become the first operating nuclear plant in Southeast Asia.

Uranium, flown in from the United States on a chartered Boeing 747, was trucked in, and by 1986, the operators were ready for a penultimate step called core loading.

Then came the Chernobyl disaster, which led the Philippines to mothball the Bataan plant. Last year, just when years of patient lobbying by Philippine nuclear power advocates appeared to be paying off, the Fukushima disaster occurred.

"We could have been the first nuclear country in Southeast Asia, but we were not able to do it," said Mauro Marcelo, a nuclear engineer at the National Power Corporation, the state-owned utility. "There are several dates when we could have become a nuclear country, but every time a catastrophic event happened. We don't need to hire nuclear experts but feng shui masters to get rid of the bad luck."

Still reeling from Fukushima, the plant's owners have decided to turn it into a tourist attraction, featuring a tour of the containment building. The plant, which has never generated a watt of electricity, is now producing revenues from the flow of tourists from the Philippines and abroad, especially Japan. Tours of the plant, whose owners sold off the uranium in 1997, are booked months ahead, said Dennis Gana, a spokesman for the utility.

On a recent tour, the Bataan plant's supporters were clearly cheered by the surprising success of the tourism project. They now made their case for nuclear power to captive audiences, describing it as critical to the Philippines, whose economy is hobbled by one of the highest electricity rates in Asia because of its reliance on fossil fuels.

The Philippines, the first country in Southeast Asia to consider nuclear power, they said, was now surrounded by nations, like Vietnam and Malaysia, that are moving to adopt nuclear power. The Philippines, outpaced by its neighbors in economic development, would fall further behind.

They ushered tourists into the plant, which had been left largely the way it was when Westinghouse built it a quarter of a century ago. A green rotary phone — a hot line to the office of the country's president — sat prominently in the main control room.

The handful of employees in charge of the plant's "preservation" expertly led visitors through a

labyrinth of thick concrete walls and steel doors inside which the tropical humidity was trapped. With a showmanship befitting their new duties, they organized the tour so that it led to the pièce de résistance — the pressurized water reactor that lay nearly within touching distance from an overhead steel bridge.

“It’s only here in the world that you can enter a reactor containment building and see for yourself a real reactor,” said Reynaldo Punzalan, a technician who has been working at the site since 1979 and now leads a preservation team of 20 people.

For Mr. Punzalan, guiding tourists redeemed, perhaps a little, a quarter century’s frustration: daily visual inspections of the deserted plant, the routine relieved only by the monthly rotation of steam turbines and gnawing doubts about whether “they would ever start operating the plant.” There were, of course, little pleasures to be found inside the plant’s grounds, like the sweet mangoes that grew here or the wild goats that soldiers guarding the facility kept and occasionally slaughtered and roasted.

But they paled next to the newfound stimulation from interacting with tourists, Mr. Punzalan said. For one, old jokes could be recycled for an appreciative audience.

Take the one about the air supply pipe that hung dangerously low from the ceiling — at eye level for a six-foot-tall person — in the middle of a narrow corridor.

“This is one of the non-conformances. It’s one of the defects listed. Westinghouse used to joke that this was designed for Filipinos,” Mr. Punzalan said, beating Mr. Marcelo to the story. (Mr. Marcelo retold it less than a minute later.)

For Mr. Marcelo, 59, studying nuclear engineering in college “seemed the most exciting thing at the time.” But the dream of generating nuclear power in the Philippines went back even further, to the 1950s, with the influence of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace program. In the early 1960s, the Philippines commissioned a nuclear research reactor donated by the United States.

The fate of the Bataan plant has also been tied to the vagaries of Philippine politics, or more specifically to the feud between the Marcos and Aquino families that has shaped the Philippines in one form or another over the past four decades. Many of the plant’s original and current critics oppose it because it was a project of Ferdinand Marcos, the longtime American-backed ruler.

The cost of the plant, originally estimated at \$1.2 billion, eventually ballooned to \$2.3 billion, and is believed to have filled the pockets of the Marcos family and friends. It was Corazon C. Aquino, who toppled Mr. Marcos in the “people power” revolution, who decided to mothball the plant after Chernobyl.

Mrs. Aquino’s son, Benigno S. Aquino III, the current president, has publicly stated his opposition to resurrecting the plant. The biggest advocate of rehabilitating it has been a cousin of his, Mark Cojuangco, a former congressman whose side of the family broke from the current president’s half a century ago and was one of the staunchest backers of Mr. Marcos.

In an interview, Mr. Cojuangco said family politics were “irrelevant” to his push to rehabilitate the plant, which, he said, should remain in government hands. Critics are skeptical. Mr. Cojuangco’s father, Eduardo, controls San Miguel, the beverage giant that has been moving into the energy sector and has expressed interest in acquiring the Bataan plant.

So for now family politics do not favor the plant’s rehabilitation. And, of course, there are still strong headwinds from Fukushima.

A dozen Japanese tourists recently peppered Mr. Punzalan, the technician, with questions about the safety of nuclear power. One of them, Fumie Shutoh, 59, said she had joined the tour to educate herself about nuclear power.

“Because of Fukushima, I felt that I couldn’t trust what the government told us about nuclear power,” Ms. Shutoh said.

After the Japanese group’s bus pulled away, Mr. Punzalan, 57, who has yet to give up hope of seeing the plant operate before retiring, said, “It was a tough crowd.”

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* The New York Times. Published: February 13, 2012:

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/14/world/asia/bataan-nuclear-plant-never-opened-now-a-tourism-site.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

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