

Japan reconstruction minister quits in fresh blow to PM
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Japan's newly appointed reconstruction minister Ryu Matsumoto speaks at a news conference after resigning his post, in Tokyo on July 5, 2011. — Reuters pic

TOKYO, July 5 — Beleaguered Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan took another blow today when his reconstruction minister resigned after barely a week in the job over criticism for remarks that offended victims of the March earthquake and tsunami.

The outcry among opposition parties over Ryu Matsumoto's comments had threatened to further hinder the unpopular Kan's efforts to pass key bills in a divided parliament as Japan tries to rebuild from the disasters and end a nuclear crisis.

Analysts said the government probably hoped that Matsumoto's quick resignation would avoid further deadlock over a US\$25 billion (RM75 billion) extra budget to aid disaster-hit areas and a compensation scheme for victims of the nuclear crisis at Tokyo Electric Power's tsunami-crippled nuclear power plant in northeastern Japan.

But the furore over Matsumoto, who was also doubling as environment minister, could put added pressure on the prime minister to step down himself.

Kan last month survived a no-confidence vote by pledging to quit but has since blurred the timing of his resignation.

"The (opposition) Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito may be tempted to say that Kan should go right now and until he goes, we're not doing anything," said Sophia University professor Koichi Nakano.

Matsumoto, visiting the tsunami-hit regions on Sunday, had told Miyagi Prefecture Governor Yoshihiro Murai that the government would not help communities that failed to come up with ideas themselves.

Speaking before TV cameras, Matsumoto reprimanded Murai for keeping him waiting and then ordered journalists not to report the exchange, warning that their companies would suffer if they did.

Kan will now have to find another candidate to fill the post in charge of Japan's biggest reconstruction project since the years after World War Two, a costly effort that will add to a public debt already worth twice Japan's US\$5 trillion economy.

Kan, under fire for his handling of the nuclear crisis, has said he wants to stay in his post until three bills are passed: the small extra budget, legislation to allow fresh borrowing to fund about 40 per cent of this year's budget, and measures to promote renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind power as Japan tries to wean itself from nuclear power.

Opposition parties argue that Kan should keep his promise to quit soon, and are pressing the ruling Democratic Party to revise costly spending pledges before helping to pass the deficit-bond issuance bill and are expected to come up with counter-proposals on steps to promote renewable energy. — Reuters

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