
Russia ships nuclear fuel to Iran

Story from BBC NEWS - 17/12/2007

Russia has delivered its first shipment of nuclear fuel to a reactor it is helping to build at Bushehr in Iran.

The two sides reached agreement last week on a schedule to finish building the plant after years of delays.

Some Western countries fear Iran is trying to build nuclear weapons but Tehran says its programme is for peaceful power generation only.

The UN has demanded that Iran halt uranium enrichment but has approved the Russian nuclear fuel deliveries.

Timetable agreed

The Russian company building the Bushehr plant, Atomstroieexport, said the delivery of the enriched uranium fuel began on Sunday.

The head of Iran's atomic energy agency, Gholam Reza Aghazadeh, later confirmed that the first delivery had arrived, according to Iran's state-run Irna news agency.

Enriched uranium is used as fuel in nuclear power stations. When it is more highly enriched, it can be used to make nuclear weapons.

There are two pressurised water reactors at the Bushehr site, one of which is reportedly near completion and likely to be the first major Iranian reactor to begin generating electricity, possibly by mid-2008.

BUSHEHR NUCLEAR PLANT Begun in 1974 with German assistance Work halts after Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution Resumed in 1992 with Russian help 13 Dec: Russia and Iran agree to finish plant after numerous delays Two pressurised water reactors One believed near completion, could begin operating in eight months Cost: \$1bn

Russian officials have previously said the plant could be operational within six months of fuel being delivered.

Iran first planned a reactor near the south-western port of Bushehr with German assistance in 1974.

Those plans were abandoned after the Islamist revolution in 1979 but the Russians picked up the project in 1992.

On 13 December, Russia and Iran agreed on a schedule to finish construction on the Bushehr plant after repeated delays.

Russia had said Iran was behind on payments. But many analysts believe Moscow delayed over Tehran's resistance to international pressure to be more open about its nuclear programme.

Enrichment row

The United States has been leading a drive in the UN Security Council to pass a third round of sanctions against Iran.

Russia and China have co-operated with the previous two votes but a US intelligence report two weeks ago said Iran had stopped trying to develop nuclear weapons in 2003, taking some of the steam out of the American pressure.

The latest report on Iran from the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), concluded that Tehran was being more open about some aspects of its programme, but there remained unanswered questions and uranium enrichment had not been halted despite the UN's demands.

The delivery of the nuclear fuel has removed one of the most significant practical sanctions against Tehran, says the BBC's diplomatic correspondent, Jonathan Marcus.

Diplomatic tensions

Atomstroiexport said the containers of fuel had been inspected and sealed before delivery by the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The company said the first delivery of 163 canisters of uranium-235 arrived at Bushehr on Sunday.

The full delivery will take up to two months, Atomstroiexport said. The fuel is lowly-enriched uranium which Russia says cannot be used in a nuclear weapon.

The US has said, however, that spent fuel from a reactor can be reprocessed into plutonium for a weapon.

Russia's foreign ministry said it had received assurances from Tehran that the fuel would not be used anywhere but at Bushehr.

The foreign ministry statement urged Iran to stop enriching uranium, saying there was no longer any need.

But a senior Iranian official said his country would not halt uranium enrichment under any circumstances, Reuters news agency said.

Iran has always insisted it has the right to develop the full nuclear cycle, including making the fuel for reactors.

Russia has played its Bushehr card skilfully, says our diplomatic correspondent, but risks significant additional tensions with Washington.

Iran has now been added to the top of a list that includes disagreements over a US missile defence plan, conventional arms control in Europe and the political future of Kosovo.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/middle_east/7147463.stm
