
Turkey delays inauguration of first nuclear plant tender

The Associated Press - 21/2/2008

ISTANBUL, Turkey: Turkey on Thursday delayed the opening of a tender for the construction of the country's first nuclear power plant.

The energy ministry was waiting for a government audit agency to comment on the tender's technical details before potential bidders could be invited, state-run media said. Officials said earlier but it was not clear how long the delay would be.

Turkey has recently experienced frequent cuts in its natural gas imports from Iran and Azerbaijan, on which it relies heavily for electricity production. Nuclear power is one of the best options Turkey has, Energy Minister Hilmi Guler has said.

"We must use this technology while minimizing its risks," Guler said at a recent Istanbul conference.

Power plants fueled by natural gas produce nearly half of Turkey's total electricity output. NATO member Turkey imports a majority of its natural gas from Russia and Iran.

Guler said nuclear power should answer 20 percent of Turkey's energy needs and decrease reliance on imported gas, thereby providing energy security. Alim Isik, a lawmaker on the parliamentary committee that prepared the law allowing a nuclear plant, said nuclear technology had potential but that Guler's vision was not realistic.

Construction of nuclear plants take up to a decade, he said, making it difficult to have a high nuclear energy capacity in short term.

Turkey is working hard to be an energy conduit between the gas- and oil-rich Caspian region as well as the Middle East, and the energy-hungry West. Nabucco, a pipeline project that will stretch from Turkey to Austria, aims to carry natural gas from the Caspian and the Middle East to Central and Western Europe, reducing energy dependence on Russia. The pipeline will not be operational before 2013.

Recent reports say Turkey is opposed to a French gas company building the Nabucco pipeline mainly because of French opposition to Muslim-majority Turkey's bid for European Union membership.

A French nuclear energy company, Areva, is reportedly interested in building the Turkish nuclear power plant.

But lawmaker Yilmaz Tankut, who was involved in the nuclear issue and is a member of a nationalist party, said the job should not be given to a company from a country with which Turkey has "outstanding problems."

The Mediterranean port city of Mersin has been designated as the primary site for the nuclear plant. Another plot on the Black Sea coast, Inceburun in Sinop province, is planned for a second nuclear plant, state-run news agency Anatolia said.

Hilal Atici, Mediterranean climate and energy campaigner of Greenpeace, said both sites were prone to earthquakes and that construction of nuclear plants was far too costly.
