

India to import natural uranium if supply is assured: Kakodkar

Lalitha Vaidyanathan Mumbai, Aug 28 2005 (PTI) Will India import natural uranium in the coming years? "Yes, provided a continuous life-time supply is assured by the suppliers", according to Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission Anil Kakodkar. "India is willing to buy natural uranium from other countries provided the life-time supply is guaranteed by the suppliers," Kakodkar told PTI. Kakodkar made it clear that the current reserve of natural uranium available in the country could only support 10,000 MW programme. "With availability of uranium from outside, one could also think of expanding Pressurised Heavy Water Reactor programme beyond 10,000 MW," he said. "Natural uranium from outside will be much cheaper than what we spend to produce from Indian mines as the uranium content in ores from Indian mines is less than 0.1 per cent while in the mines abroad, it ranges from 1 to 15 per cent," he said. Moreover, all these external supply will be under international safeguards and "we have absolutely no problem in it," Kakodkar said. However, "we will continue to expand our indigenous mining and processing of natural uranium in Jharkhand and in other places for the PHWR reactors," he said. For Tarapur Unit 1 and 2 located near here, Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited imported low-enriched uranium from China in 2000 which lasted for five years while uranium imported from Russia in 2003 will last upto 2007, according to Chairman and Managing Director NPCIL S K Jain.

In 1969, The General Electric of US supplied Uranium when they built India's first two boiled water reactors at a rated capacity of 210 MW each which now run at a re-rated capacity of 170 MW and are already under safeguards. Following Pokharan I and subsequent sanctions, the US reneged on its commitment to supply the fuel. However, after an agreement between the US and India during the Reagan Administration, France stepped in. But France too stopped supplies in 1992. The French fuel lasted till about 1995 when India was forced to negotiate with China. Therefore, India had to look for suppliers who will supply natural uranium to expand its PHWR programme besides the low-enriched uranium for the boiling water reactors of Tarapur and any future imported plants. Russian fuel is cheaper than Chinese, he added. Even though India is not a NPT signatory, it has in practice observed Article One of the treaty which bars transfers. The Indo-US agreement this July only formalizes and reinforces India's commitment. India already has an impeccable record of safety and export control regime and the July agreement is linked to the enactment of strengthened export control legislation, nuclear officials said.