

Indian nuclear scientists welcome nuke deal

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The Indo-American nuclear deal will not have any adverse impact either on indigenous atomic research or the country's weapons programme, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission Anil Kakodkar assured Friday.

Kakodkar's optimism on the deal announced Thursday has been shared by almost the entire nuclear establishment, including former AEC chairman P K Iyengar who had been worried about the possible adverse fallout on indigenous research and development in atomic energy.

Kakodkar, whose initial fears over placing fast breeder reactors for international inspection virtually put the nuclear establishment against the government, told PTI that he is quite happy with the final agreement announced by President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

"I am convinced this (agreement) is the practical way to move forward and I am happy with the outcome," he said in a telephone interview.

Though fine details are still to be worked out, the agreement will cause no difficulty in continuing our work on FBRs or carrying out research on thorium reactors, he said.

The Indians asked for the nuclear deal

Thorium fuelled reactors are needed to utilise India's vast thorium reserves in the third phase of the nuclear power programme.

Indigenous research efforts (in thorium and fast breeder reactors) will continue as before and (the agreed separation plan) will not effect our weapons programme, Kakodkar said.

Under the deal, India will place 14 out of its 22 nuclear facilities perpetually under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency in return for guaranteed fuel supply, and use the remaining eight facilities (including fast breeder reactors) for developing nuclear weapons.

"I have no objection to this deal as we are not losing anything," Iyengar told PTI. But he cautioned about some "fine prints" in the deal.

One thing is an "India specific" safeguard to be negotiated with IAEA. "We have to avoid any intrusive inspections by IAEA in the identified civilian facilities," he said. Secondly, India must ensure that the plutonium currently held in stocks and also bred inside its reactors is excluded from safeguards.

Iyengar also cautioned that India should not be carried away by guarantees of fuel supply to reactors as the suppliers can always increase the price of enriched uranium just as it is happening in the case of oil.

"Uranium price has already gone up three times," he said.

"I do not think India has run out of uranium ore. Only we must accelerate our uranium exploration programme," he added.

Placid Rodriguez, who headed the FBR programme in India, said he is happy that FBRs are out of IAEA safeguards.

"I would have been happier if India had been formally recognised as a weapons power because this would give us the flexibility to change a civilian facility into military any time we want," he said.

He, however, told PTI that in his view the eight facilities "out-of-bounds for IAEA" are enough to keep the FBRs and the weapons programme running.

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