

UPA-Left nuclear meeting postponed till next week

The crucial meeting of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the Left parties slated for Wednesday evening to discuss the India-US civil nuclear deal has been postponed by a week till June 25.

Although the official reason cited is External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's engagements with visiting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, informed sources said this was a ruse to give the government more time to arrive at a consensus on the contentious deal.

Amid speculation that the intensely debated pact is almost dead, the four party-Left bloc remains steadfast in its opposition to the pact. It has refused to allow the government to finalise the India-specific safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The Left leaders were to meet among themselves before holding talks with the UPA nuclear panel. The Left panel is to be held Wednesday evening.

Sources in the ruling Congress said the confusion within the party's leadership over the deal continues. A large section of leaders, a party insider said, are of the view that the government should cut its losses and forget about the deal. But others, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, are pushing hard for the deal that they say will open the way for nuclear commerce to meet the energy crisis.

Mukherjee, who heads the 15-member UPA-Left committee, tried hard to convince Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) general secretary Prakash Karat about the benefits of the deal when they met Monday night and Tuesday night but to no avail.

The Left parties have clarified that they would not allow the government to finalise the India-specific safeguard agreement with the IAEA as they believe that such a move would put the nuclear agreement with Washington in auto pilot mode.

The Left cannot make any more compromises with its opposition to the nuclear deal as it would cost it dear electorally, said sources in the CPI-M.

'What will we tell people if we allow them to go ahead and finalise the IAEA pact? It will be a political disaster for us,' a senior CPI-M leader told IANS, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The government is keen on finalising the safeguards agreement before IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei completes his term in July.

The pressure on Congress president Sonia Gandhi to go ahead with the deal despite the Left's opposition remains, the sources said.

The prime minister has been saying that the country would have to explore possibilities of other energy sources in the wake of the steep hike in international oil prices.

Once the IAEA agreement is finalised, it will be placed before the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to get an India-specific exemption to its guidelines, clearing the way for nuclear

commerce between [New Delhi](#) and NSG member countries.

Once the safeguards agreement passes through NSG, the US Congress will have to decide if it wants to give its nod to the 123 agreement to change its domestic laws to allow trade between US companies and India on civilian nuclear energy and technology.

The CPI-M-led Left parties, which extend crucial legislative support to the UPA government, had given the green signal for negotiation with the IAEA but insisted that it could not be finalised without their approval.

Apart from Karat, his party colleague and politburo member Sitaram Yechury, Communist Party of India (CPI) leaders A.B. Bardhan and D. Raja, Forward Bloc leader Debabrata Biswas and Revolutionary Socialist Party general secretary T.J. Chandrachoodan are members of the nuclear panel.

The government side is also represented by Defence Minister A.K. Antony, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal, Prime Minister's Office Minister Prithviraj Chavan, Water Resources Minister Saifuddin Soz (Congress), Railway Minister Lalu Prasad (Rashtriya Janata Dal), Surface Transport Minister T.R. Baalu (DMK) and Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar (Nationalist Congress Party).

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