

India hoping for September deadline for n-deal

India is gearing up for a possible September deadline to push through its much debated civilian nuclear deal with the United States.

'It is tough, but it may just be doable,' a top South Block source told IANS Sunday.

The political leadership has already made it clear to the ministry of external affairs that the government was 'determined to go ahead with the deal'. But a lot will depend on how things unfold in the next few days.

The most important event in the near future will be the meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush on the sidelines of the G-8 meeting in Japan July 8-9. The talks between the two leaders will perhaps be able to formulate whether a September deadline to push through the nuclear deal was possible.

Many of the documents that officials of the external affairs ministry at South Block had prepared last year during consultations with the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) members are once again being dusted and readied.

In making the nuclear deal operational, the first step for India is to decide on formalizing its safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Once this is done, a meeting of the 35-member Board of Governors of the IAEA can be convened to get its approval to the pact between India and the UN atomic watchdog.

'A lot will depend on how soon the meeting of the board can be called. It may take from a few weeks to 40 days,' the South Block source, who did not want to be identified, said.

The next step would be to secure an India-specific waiver in the NSG guidelines, but that is where [New Delhi](#) is likely to face the biggest road-block.

The prolonged debate in India on the nuclear deal has allowed many NSG members, who had earlier shown sympathy to the Indian cause, to toughen their stand.

South Block officials fear that the main opposition in the NSG may come from three countries - New Zealand, Sweden and Ireland. Interestingly, unlike many other members of the group, none of these three countries is interested in any commerce with India in the field of civilian nuclear energy.

Australia, which has toughened its position against nuclear trade with India since the Labour government came to power, has indicated that though it may not agree to supply uranium to India, it will go by the 'consensus' in the NSG.

India, not a member of the NSG, will be keen to see that a meeting of the group is convened soon after New Delhi's safeguards agreement with the IAEA is signed and approved by its board.

The other area of worry for the South Block officials is to ensure that the NSG gives an exemption to India without demanding that New Delhi sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or some other stringent conditions.

If such linkages are made, it will be extremely difficult for the government to accept them since they will also have a negative impact back home. Many of the supporters of the nuclear deal may alter their opinion on it if the NSG members bring in such conditions.

On the other hand, if the NSG members agree to amend their guidelines for India without such conditions, there is a strong possibility that the civilian nuclear agreement may be before the US Congress by September for its final approval.

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