

Australia may sell uranium to India

Australia may sell uranium to India despite New Delhi's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), according to Prime Minister John Howard.

'Certainly our policy to date has been to prohibit sales to countries which are not signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty,' Howard told reporters here.

'But as time goes by, if India were to meet safeguard obligations, some Australians would see it as anomalous that we would sell uranium to China, but not India,' he said.

China, which is a signatory to NPT, sealed a deal in April for importing uranium from Australia, which with 40 percent of the world's known reserves is the top exporter.

There has been speculation that if India allowed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear facilities, exports could proceed.

Stoking the speculation was a meeting in [New Delhi](#) earlier this year between Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Deputy Secretary David Ritchie.

Howard visited India in March and was urged by Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh to allow sales of uranium.

Howard agreed to send a delegation to India and the US to learn more about the agreement between Washington and New Delhi to share nuclear power technology.

The Indian government has refused to sign NPT because it restricts nuclear weapons to those countries that were in possession of them when the treaty was drawn up in 1970.

Howard has come under pressure from critics to hold firm to stated government policy that there will be no uranium sales to countries that are not NPT signatories.

The Labor Party's Kevin Rudd, opposition spokesman on foreign affairs, said Canberra should hold firm and not sell to any country that hadn't signed NPT.

'If we fail to do so and the regime collapses, we then end up with nuclear arms races right across our own part of the world,' Rudd said. 'We have a national interest in taking the lead in rebuilding the non-proliferation regime.'

Howard, however, told the Age newspaper: 'I don't think there's anything that's happened to justify the re-emphasis on the issue, except that India has repeated her interest in buying Australian uranium.'

The Sydney Morning Herald also said Howard is reportedly in favour of changing the existing policy but it is believed that Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer is opposed to the idea.

'But as time goes by, if India were to meet safeguard obligations, some Australians would see it as

anomalous that we would sell uranium to China, but not India,' Howard told the Herald.

'Certainly our policy to date has been to prohibit sales to countries which are not signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty,' Howard told the Age.

'And that's why at the moment we couldn't, without changing policy, sell to India, but we can to China.'

The Australian position of not selling uranium to India has put the Howard government in an uncomfortable situation as it may spoil the good relations between the two countries. India is seen as a rising economic powerhouse.

India has become an important trading partner of Australia. Recently India has overtaken Britain to become Australia's fourth largest export destination.

- DPA

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