

Australian Labour Party to 'tear up' N-deal with India

Australia's opposition Labour Party leader Kevin Rudd has said that he will 'tear up' any nuclear deal with India if he wins the election scheduled later this year. Labour is leading the opinion polls now.

The John Howard government on Thursday agreed to export uranium to meet India's growing energy needs, subject to strict conditions. This is an exception to the rule as so far Australia has only exported uranium to countries which are signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Prime Minister Howard says the deal to sell uranium to India will be of major economic and strategic advantage to both countries and boost bilateral relations.

The opposition Labour leader, who is leading in opinion polls for the forthcoming federal elections, has expressed his concerns about Australian uranium going to India and the possibility of an escalating arms race in the sub-continent.

Rudd told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) Lateline Television programme Friday: 'No one in Australia wants a nuclear arms race aided by the United States in the Indian subcontinent or between India and China.'

Australia has 40 percent of the world's known uranium reserves and the Howard government wants to reap the benefits through increased exports and lift a ban on domestic atomic power generation.

People in Western Australia, the state with the largest uranium deposits, were divided over the issue. As one caller told ABC Perth: 'I don't think that it should be sold until they (India) sign the treaty. I think that there's a reason that there is a treaty, there's a reason why we should respect the treaty and if they're not going to sign it, then obviously we can't really protect our future.'

Another caller said: 'They're going to get it from somewhere else, aren't they? We may as well get the profits from it.' One caller felt India is a developing country and has as much right to minerals and wealth as Australia does.

One caller even said: 'They have a right to nuclear technology. If they are going to use it for peaceful work, then that is good. They haven't actually bombed any of the countries so they are probably trustworthy if they say they are not going to do it.'

Speaking on ABC Perth, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer once again reiterated that, 'In fact it (India) has a very good (non) proliferation record.' On being asked why it didn't matter to Australia that India refuses to sign the NPT, Downer told the ABC, 'You can say 'well we'd like India to do that and we would but they won't. So you have to live in the world we live in, not in the world of the university classroom.'

The Howard government is also negotiating to sell uranium to Russia and could sign an agreement when Russian President Vladimir Putin visits Australia during the first week of September for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting.

While Rudd has vehemently opposed a deal with India, he has provided tacit support to the idea of selling uranium to Russia because Russia is a signatory to NPT.

However, uranium sales to both India and Russia have become a divisive political issue with smaller parties like the Greens Leader Bob Brown saying that any supply of uranium for India's civilian nuclear reactors would simply make other uranium supplies available for its nuclear weapons programme.

Greens senator Christine Milne told the media, 'With both Russia and India known to have transferred nuclear materials and technology to Iran, it is inconceivable that Australian sales of uranium to these countries will not facilitate Iran's ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons, regardless of any safeguards regime.'

Robert Ayson, a nuclear proliferation expert from the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in Canberra, brushed this charge aside. He told newsmen that India would not be helping countries like Iran 'And I think in the case of Russia, it's highly unlikely'.

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