

## Manmohan government looks at April deadline for n-deal

As the clock ticks away for the nuclear deal with the US, the Indian government is planning to conclude a safeguards pact with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) latest by mid-March and has set itself an April-end deadline to force the issue with its Left allies which are determined to thwart the deal.

Top Indian nuclear officials will hold the fifth round of talks with the IAEA later this month with a view to wrapping up the India-specific safeguards pact. The pact aims at ensuring uninterrupted fuel supply for civilian reactors India will place under safeguards and the right to take corrective action in case the fuel supply is interrupted.

It is taking longer than expected as the IAEA standard template does not apply to India, which has nuclear weapons but has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and yet desires to join global civil nuclear commerce.

Moreover, the IAEA is not a supplier of fuel and, therefore, cannot act as a guarantor of fuel supply.

'The safeguards pact itself may take some more time, may be another couple of rounds, but it will eventually be done well in time by mid-March. The real point is when the government decides to take a political call on when to force the issue with the Left,' a top government source told IANS.

'This has nothing to do with any deadline set by the US. If the Left issue is not resolved by April, then the deal is as good as gone,' the source said, requesting anonymity because of the sensitivity involved.

In case of a continuing standoff, there are two options before the government: put the deal on hold and continue with the status quo or call the Left's bluff by seeking a confidence vote in parliament.

The first option, which means the suspension of the deal, is a more likely scenario with most political parties, including the constituents of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA), not in favour of early elections.

The latter option entails putting the very survival of the government on the line if the opposition to the deal expressed by an overwhelming number of MPs in parliament in the past two years is anything to go by.

What can, however, work in the government's favour are strategic abstentions by UPA constituents and even some of the main opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the source said.

The Left parties, who prop up the ruling coalition from outside, virtually holds a veto over the nuclear deal as the deal can go ahead only after they approve of the IAEA draft pact.

By early April, the possibilities of the Left coming to some sort of truce with the UPA government on the nuclear deal will become clear, as all the Left parties will have completed their national conference by that time.

The politburo of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which heads the Left Front, will hold

a two-day meeting Monday during which it is likely to reiterate its uncompromising rejection of the nuclear deal which it fears will end up making India subservient to the US' strategic interests.

Although the government has been quick to react to the May deadline set by the three US senators who visited India recently saying it will go by its own time frame, those privy to nuclear negotiations are candid in admitting that the window for pushing the nuclear deal is indeed getting narrower by the day.

Democratic senators Joseph Biden, who heads the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and John Kerry, the former presidential candidate, and Chuck Hagel, a Republican senator from Nebraska, met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last week and told him clearly that if India did not wrap up the deal 'within a matter of weeks' and it is not ratified by the US Congress by July-end, the deal will be as good as over.

It will be renegotiated if a Democrat becomes the president next year, they warned.

Manmohan Singh told them that his government was still 'optimistic' and underlined that the deal was not yet over.

That optimism, however, will face its final test in April. Whether the government admits it or not, the deadline is for real as it will take some time to convince the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to amend its guidelines in favour of allowing global nuclear commerce with India.

Finally, the US Congress must ratify the 123 bilateral agreement before it heads for recess around July-end after which it gets sucked into pressing legislative business during the last days of the Bush presidency.

*Manish Chand* ( © IANS / India eNews)