

U.S.-Uzbek cooperation on nuclear fuel removal

A very comprehensive article on the subject

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The U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration said it had completed the removal of about 139 pounds of weapons-grade nuclear fuel from a small reactor in Uzbekistan and transferred the material to a secure storage site in Russia.

The transfer, completed in secrecy late Wednesday in Chelyabinsk, Russia, was the first return of spent fuel from a reactor in a former Soviet republic to Russia, where the fuel originated during the Soviet era. Previous transfers have involved fresh reactor fuel, which is easier to handle.

The move was one of four such transfers from Uzbekistan underwritten by the United States since January, and it capped an unusual instance of intensive cooperation between the countries.

Relations have soured since Uzbek security forces and armored vehicles opened fire on escaped inmates and anti-government demonstrators last year in the northeastern city of Andijon.

"This kind of cooperation is important, and is especially important when times are tough politically," Jon Purnell, the U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, said by telephone.

The return of the fuel cost about \$11 million. U.S. officials say fuel repatriation programs, supervised by the National Nuclear Security Administration with the cooperation of Russia and the International Atomic Energy Agency, are an important element of international nonproliferation efforts, consolidating widely scattered collections of dangerous materials.

Highly enriched uranium fuel in large enough quantities could be made into a crude nuclear bomb, and there was enough in this case.

Moreover, spent nuclear fuel, stored at many reactors around the world at various levels of security, is often highly radioactive. If it is stolen or illegally sold, terrorists could combine the material with conventional explosives to make a so-called dirty bomb that could spread the radioactive waste over a wide area.

The spent fuel in the current transfer accumulated for decades in storage pools beside a research reactor at the Institute of Nuclear Physics outside Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. Its removal was made public after the last of the material, packed into shipping casks, arrived at its destination in Russia.

Retrievals of fresh fuel, begun in 2002, have been conducted from several countries, including Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, formerly part of the Soviet bloc, and Latvia, a former Soviet republic. But the mission in Uzbekistan was an example of a post-Soviet country that has poor relations with the United States quietly cooperating on a security issue.

Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry did not reply to written questions about the fuel repatriation. But the collaboration appeared to reflect a shared sense of pragmatism and

not a larger shift in relations; there has been no public sign of a breakthrough on the main issues that have undermined the ties between the countries.

Since a violent crackdown in Andijon last May, Uzbekistan's diplomatic relations with the West, especially with the United States, have sharply deteriorated.

President Islam Karimov has publicly accused Washington of deploying Islamic terrorists to destabilize Uzbekistan. The Uzbek security services have cracked down further on civil society.

Independent organizations have been shuttered, opposition figures and human rights advocates arrested and jailed, and independent journalists beaten, detained or harassed.

Western journalists have been denied entrance to the country, often repeatedly, and news organizations that had a longstanding presence there, like the BBC, have left under official pressure.

Late last year U.S. forces vacated a military airfield in southern Uzbekistan that they had been using since 2001. Many of Karimov's top security officials have faced punitive sanctions from the European Union.

No matter the poor relations, the United States went to lengths to thank the Uzbek government for its cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation, as it did with Russia and Kazakhstan, which allowed the shipment of the spent fuel across its territory by train.

Ambassador Purnell and Andrew Bieniawski, the U.S. nuclear administration official who supervised the Uzbek fuel repatriation, said the United States had further plans for collaboration with Uzbekistan, including underwriting the conversion of the reactor so it would use low-enriched uranium, which carries fewer risks.

In spite of its public stance against the United States, Uzbekistan has accepted other forms of aid and collaboration, including help with border control.

It has also accepted about \$4 million this year from Washington's Agency for International Development for health care programs, including HIV and tuberculosis care and prevention and maternal health, as well as another \$2 million in economic aid, including micro-credit for small businesses, the embassy said.