

Russia ignores U.S., delivers nuclear fuel to India

Good - it is a normal part of trade.

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Russia has delivered fresh nuclear fuel for two Indian reactors, ignoring a U.S. request for a delay until rules are formally changed to allow such transfers, American officials said in recent interviews.

The delivery, which experts say violates international rules, comes as the U.S. Congress is considering whether to approve an agreement that would allow India to obtain nuclear fuel, reactors and technology from the United States and other countries for the first time in three decades.

The Russian fuel for the two Tarapur power plants "has been delivered but it has not yet been used. It's in a storage facility," a senior U.S. official told Reuters.

"This kind of activity should not take place, in our view, until the NSG has acted. It's not good precedent," he said.

The United States has asked India to refrain from using the fuel and believes this request will be honored, he added.

The official, who spoke anonymously because of the sensitivity of the matter, insisted that while the transfer is an "irritant ... (it) has not been a major issue."

The 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group has not yet altered its rules to permit nuclear transfers to India and is not expected to do so until Congress votes. That could take months because of concern that the U.S.-India civilian nuclear co-operation agreement could undermine efforts to control nuclear proliferation.

"Russia has clearly violated NSG rules," Daryl Kimball, director of the nonprofit Arms Control Association, said of Moscow's nuclear fuel delivery.

"This is a further step towards the erosion of the NSG guidelines and the United States must speak out more strongly against Russia and India pursuing this."

Democratic Rep. Edward Markey of Massachusetts, a leading critic of the U.S.-India deal, expressed concern that the agreement has "pretty much neutralized the ability of the U.S. to block this type of shipment."

"The United States can't plausibly tell other nations not to ship nuclear material or technology to India if we are preparing to do so ourselves," he said.

As a member of the NSG, which controls global nuclear trade, Russia should not supply fuel to countries like India, which have not signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

The uranium fuel for Tarapur was delivered recently following a Russia-India agreement announced last month.

U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, who is negotiating the deal with India, mildly criticized the sale at the time.

While acknowledging that India needs energy for its fast-growing economy, Burns said Russia should delay the transfer until Congress and the NSG formally change their rules.

In supplying the fuel, Russia invoked an NSG "safety exemption clause" which allows fuel transfers if there is reason to believe that starving a reactor of fuel could result in a nuclear hazard.

But many non-proliferation experts reject this argument, reasoning that if there was a real safety issue, the reactors should be shut down, not refueled.

The United States believes "there is no immediate safety concern ... but you could make a case in the next year or two that there could be safety problem" at Tarapur, the senior U.S. official said.

Russia used the same safety rationale when it sold India nuclear fuel in early 2001. At that time, the U.S. State Department accused Russia of violating its NSG commitments and urged Moscow to cancel the deal.