



Uranium deal: PM Tony Abbott in India to sign nuclear cooperation agreement

AM By South Asia correspondent Stephanie March

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott has arrived in India with plans to sign a nuclear cooperation agreement that will allow Australia to sell uranium to New Delhi.

The deal will reduce India's nuclear isolation and increase its uranium supply options, while providing Australia with market diversification beyond China.

But nuclear observers and activists in India have claimed that the country's nuclear industry is secretive and unsafe.

The two-day trip is Mr Abbott's first visit to India as Prime Minister.

Mr Abbott arrived in Mumbai, where he is expected to visit a memorial for the victims of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks and hold meetings with business leaders.

Then he is off to New Delhi, where on Friday he will meet his recently elected Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on Friday.

The pair are expected to sign a long-awaited nuclear cooperation agreement.

India was offended at Australia's refusal to sell it uranium under the leadership of Kevin Rudd.

The Labor Party's ban on uranium sales to India was lifted in 2011 under the leadership of Julia Gillard, and the deal is expected to significantly improve relations between the two nations.

Abhijit Iyer Mitra, a nuclear expert at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi, has praised the deal.

"I would say that it is good for Australia economically, it is good for Australia strategically, it is good for India strategically and economically, and it is very, very good for the bilateral relationship," he said.

India already has uranium cooperation agreements in place with the US, Canada, Russia, France and Kazakhstan, and it is hoping in coming months to sign one with Japan.

Any shipments of Australian uranium to New Delhi are unlikely to take place for several years, but with India's plans to boost its nuclear power output from 4 per cent to 25 per cent in 2050, Australia could become a key source of yellowcake in the long term.

"It will be beneficial to India in that we get a source of energy that isn't geo politically volatile like the Middle East which is our main source of energy imports right now," Mr Mitra said.

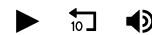
"The second thing is it gives Australia a very unique position in that it becomes so important in the Indian energy matrix, it's able to use a lot of leverage on India."

India has 20 civilian nuclear power stations and plans to build dozens more in coming years.



PHOTO: The two-day trip is Tony Abbott's first visit to India as Prime Minister. (AAP: Dan Himbrechts)

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Many uranium critics in India say the country does not have adequate infrastructure or regulation to cope with increasing use of the controversial fuel.

Concerns over nuclear future

Fears over nuclear safety

The construction of new plants has been met with resistance in several parts of the country, with communities concerned about safety and environmental damage.

S P Udayakumar is the convenor of the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy based in India's south.

"If Australia wants to sell this dangerous product to India and to many other countries in the world, they should really look at their policy first," he said.

"They haven't constructed a nuclear power plant, I don't think that it's a moral decision to sell this dangerous product to other people."

Reports from India's auditor-general and Public Accounts Committee have found the nuclear regulatory body to be weak and not independent.

Mr Udayakumar said India's government is not transparent when it comes to the nuclear power industry, nor the deal it plans to sign with Australia.

"They haven't told us ... how much uranium [they are] going to import or [are] going to buy from Australia, for which plants ... and most importantly, how this nuclear waste and the spent fuel will be stored," he said.

There are also fears that India is not up to the task of managing or properly preventing nuclear safety disasters.

"In a country like India ... people are living so closely. We are also a country that does not have a very good disaster management culture, so in a country like this, a small accident can have very disastrous consequences," Mr Udayakumar said.

India has a nuclear weapons program and is believed to have stores of about 100 warheads.

It has not conducted a nuclear weapons test since 1998, but remains a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Any uranium sold by Australian companies to India will be intended for civilian nuclear power generation, and Australian officials say there are sufficient safeguards in place to stop it being diverted to the weapons program.



And studies have found children born in villages near the uranium mining operation are twice as likely to have physical deformities as those living 30 kilometres away.

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