
INDIA

Tarapur fuel talks with U.S. break down

by Daniel Sneider, Asia Editor,
from New Delhi

Any expectations that the Reagan administration would take a more positive approach to the question of nuclear technology exports were shattered during two days of bilateral talks held in New Delhi on July 30 and 31.

At the talks the U.S. delegation, headed by Assistant Secretary of State James Malone, continued to press for termination of the 1963 Indo-U.S. agreement for supply of enriched uranium fuel for the Tarapur nuclear plant near Bombay. The agreement was to have run until 1993, but as a result of the Percy-Glenn nonproliferation legislation and the Carter administration's stance against nuclear energy, the United States now argues that it can no longer supply nuclear fuel to India.

The Tarapur case is being looked at closely by other nations as a test of the Reagan administration's policy on nuclear technology exports. In the eyes of many countries, the termination of the agreement with India would confirm that the United States has ceased to be a reliable partner for development.

Reagan upholds Carter

Hopes for a new direction in U.S. policy under the Reagan administration were set back earlier this year when the State Department proposed a "friendly termination" of the 1963 agreement with India in a first round of talks in Washington. India grudgingly accepted the U.S. demand for termination—in large part because the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi wanted relations with the new administration to start off on a positive footing.

The current deadlock in negotiations, however, stemmed from the U.S. delegation's insistence, at the first and second round of talks, that India must maintain safeguard obligations on Tarapur even *after* the termination of the 1963 uranium supply agreement. This condition, which would bar the use of the spent fuel being stored at Tarapur, is unacceptable to India.

At present, India is running the Tarapur plant at low capacity, and storage facilities for the spent fuel rods will be filled by the end of this year.

The Indian government has made it clear on several occasions that if the United States fails to fulfill its obligations under the 1963 agreement, it will go its own way. Prime Minister Gandhi last month told the press that whatever the outcome of the talks with the United States, "We will keep Tarapur going."

To do so, India has two options: 1) to reprocess the spent fuel at a reprocessing plant that was recently completed at Tarapur so as to manufacture a mixed uranium-plutonium oxide fuel; or 2) to obtain enriched uranium fuel from another supplier, possibly the Soviet Union or a Western European country.

New caste system

From all indications, the U.S. team led by Malone had no intention of reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement with India. The U.S. policy seems to be to delay agreement so as to force India to take unilateral action, which can then be used to place the onus on India for breaking the agreement. Because the United States ended fuel shipments, however, India can also argue that Washington has technically already broken the 1963 agreement.

U.S. policy toward these talks is the first implementation of what was billed as a "new" policy for nuclear nonproliferation and cooperation a few weeks ago by the State Department, although it is difficult to identify any changes from the old Carter policy. Indian journalists noted that what is called a "new caste system" has been set up, which will block nuclear energy cooperation with many countries. According to these journalists, only those countries who are viewed as close strategic allies of the U.S.—like Japan and the NATO countries—would be given the green light to go ahead with expanded nuclear energy programs, including fast-breeder technology. Those countries that are not "strategic allies" would be cut off. India, State Department spokesmen made clear at the time, falls into the second category.

The recent talks have further set back the deteriorating relations between the two countries, taking place under the shadow of large U.S. arms supplies to Pakistan, India's neighbor and opponent in three wars. Indians angrily question what they view as a "double standard" in relations between the United States and the two South Asian countries, and point to the State Department's decision to ignore clandestine Pakistani efforts—previously condemned by the United States—to construct nuclear weapons.

Nor has India failed to note that while Washington is trying to end the commercial uranium supply agreement, it has begun to lobby for changes in the Symington amendment—which bars military sales to countries which are building nuclear weapons—to facilitate sales of military equipment to the government of Pakistan.