The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Iran Begins Fueling Bushehr Reactor

By The Moscow Times

August 21, 2010



BUSHEHR, Iran ⊠ Trucks rumbled into Iran's first nuclear plant Saturday to begin loading tons of uranium fuel, a development that came more than a decade after the Russian government signed a contract to construct the plant for Iran.

The Russian-built Bushehr nuclear power plant will be internationally supervised and involves a pledge by Russia to safeguard it from the diversion of materials for nuclear weapon use.

Tehran's agreement to allow the oversight was a rare compromise by the Islamic state over its atomic program.

Western powers have cautiously accepted the deal as a way to keep spent nuclear fuel from crossing over to military use.

Iran has long declared that it has a right to produce nuclear energy. The country's nuclear chief described Saturday's startup as a "symbol of Iranian resistance and patience."

"Despite all pressure, sanctions and hardships imposed by Western nations, we are now witnessing the startup of the largest symbol of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities," Ali Akbar Salehi told reporters inside the plant, topped by a cream-colored dome overlooking the Persian Gulf in southern Iran.

Bushehr's operations aren't covered by United Nations sanctions imposed after Iran refused to stop uranium enrichment.

"Today is a historic day and will be remembered in history," Salehi said at a news conference alongside Sergei Kiriyenko, the chief of the Russian state-run nuclear corporation, Rosatom.

"The countdown to the Bushehr nuclear power plant has started," Kiriyenko said. "Congratulations."

Russia signed a $1 billion contract to build the Bushehr plant in the 1990s but dragged its feet on completing the work. Moscow cited technical reasons for the delays, but analysts say Russia used the project to try to press Iran to ease its defiance over uranium enrichment.

The Russian agreement to control the supply of nuclear fuel at Bushehr eased opposition by Washington and its allies. Last week, U.S. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said the Russian oversight at Bushehr was the "very model" offered Tehran under a UN-drafted plan unveiled last year.

That proposal called for Iran to halt uranium enrichment and obtain its supplies of reactor-ready material from abroad. It has been rejected by Iran so far.

Western leaders fear Iran's enrichment labs could churn out weapons-grade material. Iran claims that it has no interest in nuclear arms, but it refuses to give up the right to make its own fuel.

After years of delays in completing the plant, Moscow now says the project is essential to persuading Tehran to cooperate with international efforts to guard against Iran's development of atomic bombs.

Iran has said monitors from the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog, will have access to the fuel shipments at Bushehr, some 1,200 kilometers south of Tehran. Spent fuel contains plutonium, which can be used to make atomic weapons.

UN nuclear inspectors were on hand Saturday as the first truckloads of fuel were taken from a storage site to a "pool" inside the reactor. Over the next two weeks, more than 150 fuel assemblies will be moved inside the building and then into the reactor core.

It will be another two months before the 1,000-megawatt light-water reactor ⊠ heavily guarded by soldiers and anti-aircraft batteries ⊠ is pumping electricity to Iranian cities.

Iran raised more alarm in the West with its recent declaration of plans to build 10 new uranium enrichment sites inside protected mountain strongholds. It said it will begin construction on the first one in March in defiance of the UN sanctions.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/21/iran-begins-fueling-bushehr-reactor-a787