

Nuclear Fuel Reloaded at Iran Plant

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Atomstroieexport, the state company that built Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, said Friday that it has started reloading fuel into the reactor, more than a month after the fuel was ordered removed because of contamination concerns.

Atomstroieexport said in a statement that the reactor will be reassembled "shortly," but did not give further details of when it might be put into service.

Fuel-rod insertion began in October, at which time Iran said the 1,000-megawatt light-water reactor would begin transmitting electricity to Iranian cities by December.

But in late February, Russia ordered that fuel be removed because of concerns that metal particles might be contaminating fuel assemblies. It said damaged elements were found in a cooling pump at the plant, raising the possibility that metal particles could get on the fuel assemblies.

The fuel assemblies were then washed, and the reactor pressure vessel was cleaned, the Atomstroieexport statement said.

The United States and some of its allies believe that the Bushehr plant is part of a civil energy program that Iran is using as cover for a covert program to develop nuclear weapons capability. Iran denies the accusation.

Meanwhile, an Iranian lawmaker said the parliament has opened an investigation into repeated delays in the startup of Bushehr.

The delays have prompted Iranian officials to describe Russia as an "unreliable partner." Iran's state media have often said politics, not technical issues, are the reason behind the delay.

"A six-member committee has been set up to probe the delays. ... We've spent a lot of money on this project, and yet the Russians have reneged on their promises one after the other on the startup. We've begun a full-fledged probe," Gholam Ali Meigolinejad said in an interview Friday.

Meigolinejad, who is a member of the team, said the parliament would prepare a report within the next two months that will be the foundation for decisions on how to deal with the Bushehr plant.

He said the fuel unloading has delayed the Bushehr startup for a year.

The Bushehr project dates back to 1974, when Iran's U.S.-backed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi contracted with the German company Siemens to build the reactor. The company withdrew from the project after the 1979 Islamic Revolution toppled the shah and brought hard-line clerics to power.

In 1992, Iran signed a \$1 billion deal with Russia to complete the project, and work began in 1995.

Under the contract, Bushehr was originally scheduled to come on stream in July 1999.

Foreign intelligence reports have said the control systems at Bushehr were penetrated by Stuxnet, malicious software designed to infiltrate computer systems. Iran has all along maintained that Stuxnet was only found on several laptops belonging to plant employees and didn't affect the facility's control systems.

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