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Canada urges India to open up nuclear reactor

Reuters

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WASHINGTON: Canada urged India on Monday to allow nuclear inspectors access to a Canadian-supplied reactor where experts say the country produces a significant amount of its weapons-grade plutonium.

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Lack of independent access to the Cirus research reactor, located north of Mumbai, is one of the issues slowing implementation of a sweeping nuclear cooperation deal that the United States announced with India on July 18.

That deal has come under fire from the US Congress and from non-proliferation experts who say the case of the 40-megawatt reactor raises questions about India's trustworthiness. In a statement, Canada said it has urged US and Indian officials to designate the reactor a civilian facility open to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The United States is directly affected because it supplied Cirus with "heavy water," which is used in some reactors to moderate nuclear fission. "Our 1956 bilateral agreement, through which we provided India with the Cirus research reactor, states that that reactor and products resulting from its use would be employed for peaceful uses only," said the statement, read by Canadian diplomat Kelly Anderson.

Designating Cirus a civilian facility "would respect the peaceful assurances of our original agreement," Anderson said at a programme sponsored by the Monterey Institute's Center for Non-proliferation Studies. Canada cut off nuclear cooperation with India in 1974 after plutonium from Cirus was used in India's first nuclear test.

At the time, India called the test "peaceful." It resumed testing in 1988 and now acknowledges its nuclear weapons capability.

The United States administration maintains India has an excellent non-proliferation history, thus meriting the major changes in United States law and international regulations needed to permit previously-banned civilian nuclear cooperation with India. India, along with neighbouring Pakistan and Israel, has not signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Nuclear expert Leonard Spector said Cirus is now "embedded in the nuclear weapons programme of India." Plutonium produced by Cirus should be sequestered from India's military inventory, he added.

Former IAEA inspector David Albright estimated that about 25 per cent of India's stockpile of weapons-grade plutonium came from Cirus. This is a "significant amount... so this is a real issue," he said.

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