

By Reuters

Wednesday January 9, 11:26 AM

By Arshad Mohammed

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Critics of the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement on Wednesday urged two international groups whose approval is vital to the deal to take steps to ensure it does not undermine global nonproliferation efforts.

Nearly 100 nongovernmental organizations and 25 individuals made their case in a letter to the 45 nations of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which governs international nuclear trade, and to some board members of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog.

The letter, a copy of which was obtained by Reuters ahead of its public release on Wednesday, argued that the deal would "damage the already fragile nuclear nonproliferation system and set back efforts to achieve universal nuclear disarmament."

Endorsed by groups including the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the letter urged NSG members to agree to cut off all nuclear trade with India if it resumes nuclear testing for any reason.

Among other things the letter, to be released by the Washington-based Arms Control Association and Tokyo's Citizens' Nuclear Information Center, also called on India to declare it has stopped producing fissile material for atomic bombs and commit to permanently end nuclear testing.

Analysts said these two conditions, if embraced by the NSG, would likely kill the deal for India.

The proposed U.S. civil nuclear cooperation agreement would give India access to U.S. nuclear fuel and equipment for the first time in 30 years even though New Delhi has tested nuclear weapons and refused to join nonproliferation agreements.

The deal is controversial in India, where it is opposed by the Communist allies of the Congress Party-led government, who believe it would infringe on Indian sovereignty. It has also been criticized by Western nonproliferation experts who fear it will undercut efforts to stop the spread of nuclear arms.

NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH NEW DELHI

The Bush administration sees the deal as the centerpiece of a new, strategic relationship between Washington and New Delhi and argues that it will help India meet its soaring energy needs and provide business opportunities for U.S. companies.

U.S. officials deny it will weaken the nonproliferation regime.

The deal was reached during the summer but before it can go into effect India must reach an agreement with the IAEA to place its civilian nuclear reactors under U.N. safeguards.

Indian and IAEA officials discussed a safeguards agreement in Vienna last week and are due to meet again on Jan. 17.

"They made progress but they are still not there," said a Vienna diplomat close to the IAEA, saying the two sides were looking toward the possibility of finishing up in time for the IAEA board of governors to vote on any deal in March.

The deal must also get clearance from the Nuclear Suppliers Group, whose members work together to prevent nuclear exports for peaceful purposes from being used to make atomic weapons.

After those steps, the deal must be finally approved by the U.S. Congress, a tall order in a U.S. election year.

"I don't think it's dead but I don't think it'll be easy to do this year," said Sharon Squassoni, a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace nonproliferation expert.

"It looks to me like the Arms Control Association is beating a dead horse because I think this deal is dead because of political opposition in India," said analyst Gary Samore of the Council on Foreign Relations think tank. "It is really an irony that the U.S. government gave the Indian government an incredibly sweet deal but it turned out that it's the Indians who can't deliver."

(Additional reporting by Mark Heinrich in Vienna)