

India to tap uranium-rich Africa for fuel

By RAMESH RAMACHANDRAN

New Delhi, Feb. 4: New Delhi's belated attempts at tapping the African continent for sourcing uranium to fuel its ambitious civil nuclear programme is beginning to show results. Gabon has conveyed that it will not be averse to supplying uranium to India. An Indian company recently bagged exclusive rights for exploration and mining of uranium in Niger.

Niger, Namibia and certain other African countries produce sizeable quantities of uranium and, importantly for India, are not members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Sources tracking India's engagement of Africa told this newspaper that Gabon is willing to enter into a commercial transaction with India. New Delhi is studying the possibility of reciprocating by enhancing its civil and military cooperation with Gabon, a source said, adding that the Mumbai-based Taurian Resources has made a foray into Niger's uranium mining industry. The sources maintained that India needs to refocus attention on the non-NSG countries also because of the reluctance of Australia, Canada and Kazakhstan to supply uranium to non-NPT signatories like India. This newspaper has reported that Canada and Kazakhstan have joined Australia in suggesting to India that there is no change in their policies of exporting uranium only to those countries that have signed the NPT.

The Summit of the India-Africa Forum, to be held here in April, can be expected to lend an impetus to New Delhi's desire to court the African continent for uranium. The sources said that secretary (economic relations) K.C. Singh in the ministry of external affairs has been mandated to explore all the options and to give direction to the newly created division of energy security.

According to Prof. Bharat Karnad of the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research, exploring the non-NSG African states for uranium is "eminently realisable" and a better option than tying India to the proposed India-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement.

"We don't need this deal (for uranium). The government is living in a fool's paradise and waiting for things to happen when we should have done our home work and first approached the non-NSG countries before exploring the India-US nuclear deal," Prof. Karnad told this newspaper.

He said that some African countries, like Niger, have "absolutely enormous" deposits of natural uranium and are not members of the NSG. He blamed New Delhi's "slow-moving, viscous" foreign policy for India not tapping the African continent for sourcing uranium to fuel her nuclear energy programme.

"They (non-NSG African countries) are happy to provide. These will be commercial deals. The question is how can we incentivise them," Prof. Karnad added. Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Angola, which are outside the NSG, can be approached for procuring natural uranium. Namibia is among the largest producers of uranium. Similarly, uranium is among the largest export items for Niger. Triangular cooperation among India, Portugal and Angola, a former Portuguese colony, has also been proposed.

A source familiar with the negotiations for the proposed India-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement said New Delhi could consider a two-pronged approach to meet its appetite for energy. The first prong would require sourcing of nuclear fuel from the non-NSG countries. New Delhi could either make direct investments in uranium mines abroad or collaborate with Indian companies operating in certain African countries.

The second prong would be to augment domestic production of uranium. The sources cited Atomic Energy Commission chairman Anil Kakodkar as saying that domestic uranium production would be augmented and exploration will be stepped up in Meghalaya and Karnataka. Dr Kakodkar also said that a uranium mine and processing mill would soon be commissioned at Tummalapalli, in Andhra Pradesh.