

U.S. pressing for deal with other countries to build nuclear fuel repository in Mongolia

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Momentum has been quickly building behind the scenes for an ambitious and controversial project led by the United States and Japan to build a nuclear fuel repository in Mongolia as Washington is trying to secure a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with other countries concerned by the end of this year.

After the Mainichi reported on the proposal in May, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which wants to be able to buy nuclear fuel from Mongolia, joined the list of countries pursuing the project, and earlier this month the U.S. Department of Energy sounded out other countries concerned about signing a memorandum of understanding on the program by the end of this year. The project itself is to build a mechanism in which advanced countries force the maintenance of nuclear waste, which takes at least 100,000 years to break down to become harmless, onto developing countries.

On May 6, 2009, three men landed at Chinggis Khaan International Airport in the Mongolian capital of Ulan Bator. Two men from an American think-tank and a bureaucrat from the Japanese Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry held talks with then-Mongolian Foreign Minister Sukhbaataryn Batbold (currently the prime minister) and Defense Minister Luvsanvandan Bold, telling them, "Mongolia should become the Switzerland of the East." They then presented a proposal written in English on a spent nuclear fuel repository.

Mongolia, sandwiched between China in the south and Russia in the north, has long suffered from repeated interference by the two giants. Drawing on Switzerland, which declared itself a permanent neutral country and boosted its security by hosting United Nations organizations, the three men tried to persuade the Mongolian officials by saying, "If your country builds a storage facility for spent nuclear fuel and has it managed by an international organization, China and Russia will no longer be able to meddle carelessly in your affairs. In doing so, your country will be able to contribute to the strengthening of security in Northeast Asia."

The proposal is to build a nuclear fuel production facility, nuclear reactors, a research lab and a storage facility for spent nuclear fuel in an area near uranium mines in the Gobi Desert, southern Mongolia, and let the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) manage the facilities.

Their explanations to the Mongolian side focused on security for Mongolia. The Obama administration withdrew its plan late in 2009 to build a storage facility for spent nuclear fuel in an area near Yucca Mountain in Nevada due to strong resistance from local residents. Playing key roles in thrashing out the Mongolian plan were the U.S. Energy Department, which now found itself on a search for an alternative repository site abroad, and Toshiba Corp (including its subsidiary Westinghouse Electric Co.) — the biggest nuclear reactor manufacturer in both the U.S. and Japan — which predicts that securing a storage facility for spent nuclear fuel would boost its sales of nuclear power plants overseas.

According to the IAEA, an estimated 330,000 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel exist in the world. About 15,000 tons of such fuel is produced annually and 8,500 tons of such fuel is stored for disposal

and 2,000 tons is reprocessed. Even if spent nuclear fuel is reprocessed, it will generate high levels of radioactive substances, and therefore it will need to be contained for the same length of time as that for spent nuclear fuel that is being disposed.

It is extremely difficult to build a nuclear waste repository in the United States and Japan due to fierce opposition from local residents. Therefore, Mongolia, which boasts the lowest population density among U.N. members and sits on solid ground, was singled out for the ambitious and contentious nuclear project.

Mainichi Shimbun , August 1, 2011

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/08/01/20110801p2a00m0na022000c.html>
