

Nuclear deal 'important'

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THE possible sale of uranium to India represented a "very important moment in Australia's engagement with Asia," India's High Commissioner, Prabhat Prakash Shukla, said yesterday.

At a series of meetings in India last week, senior government officials from both sides discussed the possibility of Australian uranium sales despite India's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Indian diplomatic sources have confirmed to *The Australian*.

The meetings followed John Howard's visit to India in March and were intended to gather information about the recent agreement between India and the US to share nuclear fuel and technology.

Mr Shukla told the Future Summit on the Gold Coast that, while India had not signed up to the NPT, it nevertheless remained willing to rid itself of nuclear weapons once the rest of the world did.

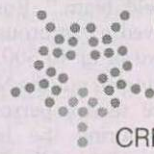
"We have never deviated from this and this is still our position — if you're willing to get rid of nuclear weapons on a global basis, we'll be there," Mr Shukla said.

The Prime Minister said yesterday the meetings held in India last week did not "of itself indicate or flag a change of policy".

"We are not currently disposed to change our policy in relation to selling uranium to countries that aren't party to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty," Mr Howard said.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer also said Australia had not "indicated to the Indians any planned change to that position".

"Their (India's) general position is that they will sign up to International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, but they will only allow inspections for, if you like, non-sensitive or non-



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military reactors," Mr Downer said. Senior Indian diplomatic sources continued to insist yesterday that the two countries discussed how India might be able to buy Australian uranium without first signing the NPT. "India does not have the uranium it needs and since we do not, we need to buy it, and Australia has uranium," one source said.

During the talks, India suggested it was prepared to open some of its nuclear facilities to international inspectors but would refuse to sign the NPT, which would prohibit its development of nuclear weapons.

Uranium industry analysts point to the recent nuclear power agreement between the Bush administration and India as a possible model for future negotiations.

On May 29, Australian officials will travel to Rio de Janeiro to attend a plenary meeting of the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, where the US is expected to lobby other countries to accept the deal.

A spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said Australia expected the agreement to be discussed.

"Australia and other NSG members want to examine this closely, ensuring that the question of possible nuclear supply to India is addressed in a way that upholds the wider nuclear non-proliferation regime," the spokesman said.

Additional reporting: AAP, Reuters

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