

Russian Nuclear Reactor Chief Leaves a Puzzle

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Global Research, August 23, 2010

IDN-InDepth NewsAnalysis 23 August 2010

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Oil and Energy](#)

As Iran began fuelling its first nuclear power plant in the southern city of Bushehr, remarks by the Russian state nuclear energy company Rosatom's chief Sergei Kiriyenko that it was a "big international project" continued to puzzle political observers.

Kiriyenko joined Iranian Vice President Ali Akbar Salehi, who heads the country's Atomic Energy Organization, to open the facility on August 21 after almost four decades of sporadic work. Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were also on hand to open the nuclear fuel containers and oversee their transportation to the reactor.

The Moscow Times reported on August 20 that in a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin the previous day, Kiriyenko had called the construction of Bushehr nuclear power plant a "big international project" in which more than ten European Union and Asia-Pacific countries had taken part.

This remark puzzled observers because the state-run nuclear holding had never before referred to any foreign participation in constructing the controversial plant, which Russia first agreed to complete in 1992.

"The one billion dollar project has been stalled repeatedly amid international sanctions and what Tehran has called Moscow's pandering to the West," wrote the Moscow Times, adding: "Russian political leaders have defended the pace of the work as Rosatom seeks to gain a larger foothold in the lucrative and highly competitive market for nuclear power construction deals."

The launch of the nuclear power reactor "coincides with Russia's position that any country in the world has the right to nuclear energy for peaceful use," provided that it is monitored by the IAEA, Kiriyenko told Putin, according to the government website <http://premier.gov.ru>.

According to the official Russian government website, Kiriyenko told the Russian Prime Minister: "What is important, Mr. Putin, is that we have shown that Russia always fulfils its obligations. Russia's position is that any country in the world has the right to use nuclear power peacefully under IAEA supervision while observing international rules and regulations.

"It is also important that it is a large international project. Of course, most of the work has been done by Russia, but deliveries have come from more than 10 other countries, including many in the European Union and the Asia-Pacific Region.

"It is therefore a kind of international project, large and global, that demonstrates that if Iran can develop peaceful nuclear energy under IAEA supervision and it complies with the standards of international legislation, this possibility can become reality both for Iran and for any other country. Russia always fulfils the obligations it undertakes."

A Rosatom spokesman could not be reached to comment on foreign participation in the Bushehr project. A spokeswoman for Atomstroieexport, the Rosatom unit that specializes in construction of nuclear power facilities abroad, was also unavailable for comment, the Moscow Times said.

Observers wondered whether Kiriyenko was overstating the extent of foreign contributions, particularly in view of the pressure from Washington to hold off on starting the facility. Construction on Bushehr was started by the German Kraftwerk Union in 1974, which was formed after Siemens and AEG merged their activities 1969 in the sector of conventional and nuclear power plants. Siemens pulled out of the country in 1980.

WILD FIRES

Kiriyenko's meeting with Putin covered subjects other than the Bushehr nuclear reactor too, in view of the fact that a heat wave had led to hundreds of wildfires burning across forested areas in western Russia, some threatening nuclear facilities. A state of emergency was declared in seven western regions and many additional deaths were reported from air pollution caused by the fires.

Rosatom director general Kiriyenko informed Putin further: "The most difficult situation was in Sarov. Because it is surrounded by woods, fires attacked us three times. At first, it came from the west. Then it crept up from the south. The last blaze encroached from a nature reserve to the east." He added that more than 3000 men and 300 pieces of fire fighting equipment were used to control the fires at Sarov.

He told Putin that, as a precautionary measure, Rosatom had stopped work at key nuclear sites and removed nuclear and radioactive as well as other explosive materials from the sites. Kiriyenko said: "That is to say, we ensured that even if the flames break through the defensive perimeter, there would be no nuclear, radiation or environmental risk. Now our production is returning to normal."

Although the fires have been brought under control and Rosatom continues to resume its work schedule, Kiriyenko warned that a risk remains that, should winds pick up, any remaining embers and pockets of fires could be fanned. Therefore, he said, lookouts have been posted to monitor the situation and fire fighting equipment is being kept on hand.

He told Putin that, in preparation of possible future forest fires, the fire-breaks around nuclear facilities will be widened by 100 metres as the current fire-breaks were insufficient. In addition, special robots and monitoring devices will be used to "keep a close eye on our key facilities," Kiriyenko said.

He noted that the use of thermal imagers on helicopters had proved useful in monitoring the wildfires. A new system — known as 'Lidar' — will be installed at some facilities, he said, which will "spot any hotbed of fire or change within 15 kilometres."

When asked about plans for new nuclear generating capacity, Kiriyenko told Putin that the second unit at the Rostov nuclear power plant, which started up in March 2010, was on schedule and reached full generating capacity of 1000 MWe in the week ending August 20.

ARMENIA AND UKRAINE

According to the World Nuclear News (WNN), he also noted progress in a number of

overseas projects. Next month, Russia plans to reach an intergovernmental agreement on the construction of Vietnam's first nuclear power plant so that such an agreement can be signed in October when Putin visits the country.

Meanwhile, an intergovernmental agreement was signed August 20 between Russia and Armenia for cooperation in the construction of a new nuclear power plant in southwestern Asian country, Armenia.

The agreement — signed in Yerevan by Kiriyenko and Arman Movsisyan, Armenia's minister of energy and natural minerals — stipulates that Russia will build a new nuclear power plant in Armenia based on VVER-1000 reactors and supply fuel for the plant. The exact size and design of the plant has yet to be decided.

The plant, to be built by AtomStroyExport, will be owned and operated by a joint Armenian-Russian company, ZAO Metsamorenergoatom.

Armenia's existing Metsamor nuclear power station originally hosted two reactors. Both were closed down after a severe earthquake in 1988 triggered concerns about their seismic vulnerability. One unit is now undergoing decommissioning, but the other restarted operations in 1995 and is earmarked for closure around 2016.

Armenia relies on Metsamor for over 40 percent of its electricity and in November 2007 the United States also signalled its support for nuclear new build in the country, pledging a reported \$2 million towards planning studies.

In June 2009, the Armenian government passed legislation providing for construction of up to 1200 MWe of new nuclear capacity from one or more reactors. Cost estimates were in the range of \$4-\$5 billion. Construction is slated to begin in 2011-12, with commissioning by 2017.

In addition, the Ukrainian state-owned Nuclear Fuel concern has signed an agreement on August 18 with Rosatom to take a 10 percent stake in the International Uranium Enrichment Centre (IUEC) to be sited at the Angarsk Electrolysis Chemical Combine in Siberia.

The IUEC is a joint initiative of Russia and Kazakhstan to provide assured supplies of low-enriched uranium for power reactors to new nuclear power states and those with small nuclear programs, giving them equity in the project, but without allowing them access to the enrichment technology. The project has so far gained the participation of Armenia and Ukraine. However, currently Russia owns 90 percent of the IUEC, while Kazakhstan holds 10 percent. (IDN-InDepthNews/22.08.2010)

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