

Work on UAE's first nuclear plant to commence next year

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Abu Dhabi: The UAE's nuclear facilities will withstand even the crash of a large commercial aircraft, a matter which illustrates the extreme caution with which the government wants to proceed, especially after the 9/11 incident, said Dr Hans Blix, the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, on Monday.

Construction of the UAE's first nuclear power plant is scheduled to start in the first quarter of next year after a licence is obtained and the plant is scheduled to come on stream in 2017, an official familiar with the UAE nuclear programme said on Monday.

Three other nuclear power plants, which will be built on the same site, are scheduled to be operational one after another in the next three years by 2020, the official added.

The official was speaking after the International Advisory Board (IAB), a body mandated to provide an independent assessment of the UAE's peaceful nuclear energy programme, released its first semi-annual report. In December, the Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (Enec), the body in charge of developing the UAE's nuclear programme, said it had filed an environmental assessment and two licence applications to prepare the site to the Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR).

Enec has selected government land in Braika, a site on the Arabian Gulf about 75km from the Saudi border, for the construction of the country's first four nuclear plants.

The report follows extensive meetings conducted between the International Advisory Board members and UAE entities operating in the nuclear energy sectors, such as the Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR) and Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (ENEC).

Chaired by Blix, the IAB's report assesses the progress of the UAE's peaceful nuclear energy programme and reflects the IAB's views on the performance of the programme in five fundamental areas: safety, security, non-proliferation, transparency and sustainability. It also provides recommendations for the relevant entities regarding potential strategies to improve and strengthen the programme.

Nuclear safety

According to the report, the UAE was committed to making nuclear safety the top priority in the establishment of FANR and Enec, including a clear division in their roles and responsibilities. The IAB found strong evidence of commitment to regulatory independence and competence, including legal provision designed to insulate regulatory decision makers from outside pressure.

The report found a serious commitment to the establishment of a strong safety culture as well as indications that the Enec management fully understands both the importance and the complexity of this undertaking.

Energy demand in the UAE was forecast to grow about 9 per cent per annum from 2007 to 2020, with an estimated 41,000 megawatts per year required in 2020. In 2007, demand was about 13,000 MW.

Currently, available energy sources (oil, gas, coal) were projected to be insufficient, too costly, and environmentally harmful to supply future needs.

The advisory board found the decision to give the public access to the IAB's reports a particularly forward thinking step to assure transparency.

"I am very pleased that our report is made public in line with the policy of openness of the UAE Government. My colleagues and I wholeheartedly support the Government's determination to use nuclear power on a large scale for a clean and sustainable generation of electricity. Our comments and recommendations are offered to assist the Government ensuring safety, non-proliferation and transparency," said Dr Hans Blix, the IAB chairman.

He added in a conference phone conversation with reporters that a final waste disposal strategy had not yet been completed and waste disposal options were being evaluated.

The IAB, among other steps, urged the acceleration of ongoing efforts to put in place a comprehensive legislative framework to govern the import and export of nuclear materials, equipment and technology, as well as to develop and implement a nuclear liability regime consistent with existing standards embodied in arrangements such as the Vienna Convention on Nuclear Liability.

Guidelines: Recommendations

- Integrate new security measures into the design of nuclear power plants to protect against threats including impact by a large commercial aircraft.
- Enhancing import/export regime within the UAE directing resources at this effort on a priority basis.
- Due-diligence effort in pursuing enhanced security measures to protect nuclear facilities.
- Establishing an adequate legislative framework for nuclear export and import control to ensure that transfer of nuclear materials, equipment and technology occurs in a proliferation resistant, secure, safe and environmentally responsible manner with proper inspection when needed.
- Developing further in-house engineering capabilities specifically aimed at continually improving and enhancing the level of safety.