

Top Indian scientist calls for nuclear moratorium

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A top Indian scientist and government advisor has called for a moratorium on all future nuclear projects following the nuclear crisis in tsunami-hit Japan.

In an open letter, extracts of which were published in the media Friday, P. Balaram, director of the Indian Institute of Science and part of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's scientific advisory council, described the events in Japan as "a wake-up call" for India.

"We strongly believe that India must radically review its nuclear power policy," Balaram said in the letter, which was signed by 50 prominent figures.

"Pending the review, there should be a moratorium on all further nuclear activity, and revocation of recent clearances for nuclear projects," he said.

Fuel-hungry India has pushed ahead with its nuclear energy plans since 2008 when then-US president George W. Bush signed into law a nuclear deal that ended a three-decade ban on US nuclear trade with India.

Since then, France, Russia and private US and Japanese firms have been locked in fierce competition to sell new reactors to India.

Balaram's call marked the first direct appeal from within government circles for a nuclear moratorium.

The letter said the Department of Atomic Energy had "cavalierly minimised (the possibility of an accident)... and declared that Indian reactors cannot undergo serious accidents."

The Japanese crisis showed, it argued, "that even in an industrially advanced country, nuclear reactors were vulnerable to catastrophes, in spite of precautions and safety measures."

Other signatories included former Atomic Energy Regulatory Board chairman A. Gopalakrishnan, former chief of naval staff L. Ramdas, former power secretary E.A.S. Sharma and former UN ambassador Nirupam Sen.

The letter urged the government to conduct an independent and transparent safety audit of its nuclear facilities.

"In the light of what has happened in Japan. I believe completely transparent safety audits are required for all nuclear projects," Balaram told the Hindustan Times newspaper.

The Japanese crisis has fuelled opposition to construction of what would be one of the world's largest nuclear plants in a seismically-sensitive region of Maharashtra state, with six reactors providing 9,600 megawatts of power.

French company Areva has signed a 9.3-billion-dollar framework deal to supply the first two of Jaitapur's third-generation pressurised water reactors, with the plant scheduled to begin producing power in 2018.

India's prime minister has promised that the safety of all the country's nuclear power plants would be checked to ensure their capacity to withstand a major natural disaster.

India is one of the world's biggest markets for nuclear technology, with plans to reach an atomic power capacity of 63,000 megawatts by 2032, from the current level of 4,560 megawatts.

Last month, India's [atomic energy](#) regulator Srikumar Banerjee said driving or walking on the notoriously dangerous streets of New Delhi posed more of a risk than the country's 20 nuclear reactors.

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