

# India PM blames foreign NGOs for anti-nuclear demos

February 24 2012, by Ammu Kannampilly

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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh blamed US non-profit groups in an interview published Friday for whipping up anti-nuclear demonstrations that have stalled two new atomic plants.

Singh told the American journal "Science" that "the atomic energy programme has got into difficulties because these NGOs, mostly I think based in the US, don't appreciate the need for our country to increase the energy supply."

India's fast-growing economy is heavily dependent on coal, but the government hopes to raise the proportion of power produced from nuclear sources from less than three percent to 25 percent by 2050.

"The thinking segment of our population certainly is supportive of nuclear energy," Singh said during the interview in which he also criticised foreign NGOs for encouraging opposition to genetically modified food.

The groups are "often funded from the US and Scandinavian countries" and "are not fully appreciative of the development challenges that our country faces," he said, according to a copy of the article posted on his website.

India's plans to construct two massive atomic power stations in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and the western state of Maharashtra have been thrown into disarray following angry protests led by local villagers

and activists.

The government was forced to stall its Tamil Nadu programme to build two 1000-megawatt nuclear reactors in Koodankulam with Russian help, leading Russia's ambassador to India, Alexander Kadakin, to voice frustration.

"We cannot allow our scientists to remain idle endlessly. For months together, they are without work," Kadakin was reported to have said earlier this month by local media.

In Maharashtra, one man was killed and several injured in April 2011 during protests against plans to build two French reactors in Jaitapur amid fears over the loss of land, radiation and destruction in a nearby ecologically sensitive area.

Global anti-nuclear environmental group Greenpeace, founded by a group of American and Canadian activists in the 1970s, defended itself against Singh's allegations.

"The anti-nuclear movement in India isn't a one-day wonder. It's absolutely a grassroots-driven issue. It matters to people," Karuna Raina of Greenpeace told AFP.

"The prime minister should look into why ordinary people don't want to pay a huge human and financial cost for nuclear energy. He can't just dismiss criticism by pointing fingers at foreign organisations," she said.

Environmentalists have steadily campaigned to stop construction of new nuclear plants in the country, especially after Japan's Fukushima crisis last March, but the government has vowed to press on.

Nuclear energy has been a priority for India since 2008 when then US

president George W. Bush signed into law a nuclear deal with New Delhi that ended a three-decade ban on US nuclear trade with the country.

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

Singh also backed genetically modified crops to increase farm yields, despite a decision by his government in 2010 to halt plans to introduce its first genetically modified vegetable.

Although state-funded regulators approved the GM variety of aubergine in 2009, activists warned the government was moving in haste and needed to hold extensive tests on the long-term health risks of consuming the modified vegetable.

The ban is due to be reconsidered this year.

Singh is a severely weakened leader, with his second term in office overshadowed by corruption scandals and difficulties in pushing through reforms once expected from the left-leaning administration.

An editorial in the Mint daily newspaper said Friday the prime minister's comments on foreign NGOs and their impact on nuclear and agricultural policies are "indicative of the deep crisis of governance facing India today".

"While democratic India cannot dismiss out-of-hand the opposition both measures are facing, the challenge of convincing citizens of the necessity and urgency of adopting them falls to the government," it said.

"It is simply not enough for the prime minister to throw up his hands and blame NGOs for his own governments inability to get things done," the newspaper said.

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