

UAE nuclear programme edges toward 2018 launch

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Christer Viktorsson, the Swedish-Finnish director general of the UAE's Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR), gestures as he gives an interview with AFP in his office in the capital Abu Dhabi on August 10, 2017

At first glance, the long hallway seems abandoned. But behind glass walls, in soundproof offices, engineers and physicists are putting the final touches to the Arab world's first nuclear programme.

At the Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR) in Abu Dhabi, dozens of employees are reviewing the 15,000-page application for the

Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant, scheduled to launch next year.

Located just across the Gulf from Iran, which is home to a controversial nuclear programme of its own, the Barakah plant will make the UAE the first Gulf state to have a peaceful nuclear energy programme.

By 2020, the UAE Peaceful Nuclear Energy Program will be in full gear, with four nuclear reactors providing nearly 25 percent of the UAE's electricity needs, according to the state-run Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (ENEC).

The first reactor was initially set to start generating power in 2017, but ENEC recently announced its inauguration would be delayed until 2018 for technical reasons.

"We received the application for reactor one in March 2015 and since then we have been studying it," said Christer Viktorsson, director general at the Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation which oversees regulation and licensing for the UAE's nuclear programme.

Viktorsson says the federal authority has sent ENEC more than 1,000 questions seeking documented answers since 2015—and the licensing process is not yet over.

"It's a massive application," he told AFP. "There are a few areas where we still have questions."

"We have to verify... that they have security plans, like emergency plans, and if an accident happens they can deal with it."

Concerns in volatile Gulf

In the FANR offices, 300 kilometres (185 miles) west of the Barakah

plant, Emirati and foreign employees are buried in licensing paperwork in a bid to meet next year's deadline.

ENEC in April reported construction of the plant's four units had been 80 percent completed, with reactor one at 95 percent completion.

Operations teams and contingency plans are also in place, according to ENEC, and Viktorsson says he has "no doubt" that the company will meet the 2018 launch date.



A picture taken on August 10, 2017 shows the sign and logo of the UAE's Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR) at its premises in the capital Abu Dhabi

Much of the construction of the \$25-billion (21.2-billion-euro) Barakah plant has been outsourced to the Korea Electric Power Corporation, the largest electric utility in South Korea, which won the project over French multinational group AREVA.

"We don't think the nuclear power plant will cause any problems in the region," said a South Korean diplomat in the UAE, requesting anonymity.

"The Barakah [nuclear power plant](#) will play an important role for the UAE's economic development and will be a role model for the other Arab countries, proving that nuclear power can be used for peaceful purposes."

While the peaceful use of nuclear energy is far from new, the UAE nuclear programme has raised some concerns in the Gulf, a region that has long been gripped by war and political crises.

But officials in the UAE, which sits on seven percent of the world's oil reserves, say their programme will not add fuel to fire in the region, where the latest diplomatic crisis has seen gas-rich Qatar isolated from the UAE and Saudi Arabia over allegations that the emirate is too close to Iran and harbours Islamist extremists.

"Our country is and will remain a forerunner," a UAE official said on condition of anonymity.

UAE ally Saudi Arabia has also said it aims to develop a peaceful nuclear energy programme.

No uranium enrichment

Civilian safety remains a concern, and residents living inside a 50-kilometre (30-mile) radius of the Barakah plant have been instructed on procedure in case of an accident.

But concerns about safety reach far beyond the UAE's borders: the Barakah plant is about 50 kilometres east of the border with Saudi

Arabia, some 320 kilometres west of Oman and 350 kilometres south of Iran.

In addition to evacuation drills for residents, Viktorsson says, FANR has held seminars joining representatives of the UAE, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

And amid a war of words between Iran and the United States over Tehran's nuclear programme, the UAE has said it will not be developing an uranium enrichment programme or nuclear reprocessing technologies.

"I know that nuclear for many means the non-peaceful parts, but in this country the nuclear law, for example, talks about peaceful purposes and we have a programme which checks all nuclear activities," said Viktorsson.

"If there are suspicions, we interfere immediately."

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