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Brazil poised to join the world's nuclear elite

By Jack Chang
Knight Ridder Newspapers

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil - While the world community scrutinizes Iran's nuclear plans, Latin America's biggest country is weeks away from taking a controversial step and firing up the region's first major uranium enrichment plant.

That move will make Brazil the ninth country to produce large amounts of enriched uranium, which can be used to generate nuclear energy and, when highly enriched, to make nuclear weapons.

Brazilians, who have long nurtured hopes of becoming a world superpower, are reacting with pride to the new facility in Resende, about 70 miles from Rio de Janeiro.

Other countries enriching uranium on an industrial scale are the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, China and Japan.

The plant initially will produce 60 percent of the nuclear fuel used by the country's two nuclear reactors. A third reactor is in the planning stages. The government hopes to increase production eventually to meet all of the reactors' needs and still have enough to export, Brazilian officials said.

"We want to build new power plants and grow our enrichment program to be self-sufficient," said Odair Dias Goncalves, the president of Brazil's National Nuclear Energy Commission. "In the whole world, there's a big reinvestment in this area. Countries are turning back to nuclear energy."

The Resende plant's inauguration had been set for Jan. 20, but was delayed because construction wasn't completed, Dias Goncalves said. The plant may begin uranium enrichment without the hoopla later this month, officials said.

Unlike Iran, Brazil is considered a good global citizen that isn't seeking nuclear weapons, although its military ran a secret program to develop a nuclear weapon as recently as the early 1990s.

Still, some U.S. observers fear Brazil's program will encourage more countries to make nuclear fuel, raising the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation.

The United Nations nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, earlier this month reported Iran to the U.N. Security Council for failing for three years to disclose all aspects of its nuclear program to agency inspectors. Iran responded by restricting IAEA

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inspections, a move that stymies efforts to determine whether it's producing fuel for power plants or developing nuclear weapons.

Brazil's nuclear fuel needs, more than 120 tons of enriched uranium a year, don't warrant the country launching an industrial facility like Resende, especially with global supplies of the material running high, said Lawrence Scheinman, a former U.S. arms control official.

"There really isn't much justification for new enrichment facilities unless countries have a very substantial number of reactors to be serviced and don't want to depend on outside suppliers," he said. "Neither Brazil nor Iran are in those positions."

Despite the criticisms, Brazil's program hasn't drawn the outcry that Iran's nuclear plans have. Disagreements between the IAEA and Brazilian officials in 2004 over access to the Resende facility were resolved within months.

Like Iran, Brazil has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the global agreement to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. All of Brazil's 20 facilities using nuclear material are under IAEA safeguards.

Brazilian officials have worked closely with the IAEA throughout Resende's planning and construction, Dias Goncalves said. IAEA inspectors have visited the facility 32 times.

Iranian officials, on the other hand, hid their uranium enrichment work for 18 years and obtained much of their technology from a Pakistani-led smuggling ring. Iran's leaders also have called for the destruction of Israel and are known sponsors of terrorism.

"There is no way to doubt the intent of our plans because they are completely open," Dias Goncalves said. "We have to take account of every gram of uranium used."

The road to Resende did hit a few bumps in 2004 when Brazil refused to let inspectors view centrifuges used in the enrichment process, saying they had to protect Brazilian-designed innovations vulnerable to industrial espionage.

After months of negotiations, the two sides agreed to a confidential inspection regime, which is still in place, an IAEA official said.

That agreement allows IAEA inspectors to examine material coming in and out of the centrifuges but not the equipment itself, which is covered by opaque panels, said Edson Kuramoto, president of the non-governmental Brazilian Nuclear Energy Association.

Brazilian energy adviser Rogerio Cezar Cerqueira Leite said the Resende plant will allow Brazil to sell to growing markets for enriched uranium and fuel a domestic nuclear program that's bound to expand.

"Without enriched uranium, you don't have nuclear technology," Cerqueira Leite said. "It's not just national prestige. If you don't make it yourself, you will always be behind in the nuclear race."

Many Brazilians see the eventual opening of Resende as the first step in the country becoming a world leader in nuclear research, said Cerqueira Leite. Brazil has the world's sixth largest deposit of uranium.



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