

THE TIMES OF INDIA

N-deal must for energy needs: Prime Minister

10 Jun 2008, 0054 hrs IST, TNN

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Monday endorsed the concerns of India's security establishment when he sounded a chilling warning about the dangers of nuclear technology falling into the "dangerous hands" of terrorists and called for greater vigil to ensure non-proliferation of sensitive equipment and material. (Watch)

Addressing a conference on nuclear disarmament to mark 20 years of Rajiv Gandhi's action plan offered in the UN, Singh was forthright in highlighting the new dangers that countries like India faced.

"In parallel with this general commitment to nuclear disarmament, we need strengthened non-proliferation commitments such as on denying nuclear material, technology and equipment to terrorists," he said.

In doing so, the PM gave greater credence to the views of top security officials like National Security Adviser M K Narayanan, who in February had warned a conference in Munich of the threat posed by terror groups acquiring nuclear assets of volatile states.

Narayanan has also previously warned of terrorists targeting India's atomic energy establishments like the one at Trombay.

Though neither the PM nor the NSA named countries, concerns over Pakistan's arsenal have been aired. In January, IAEA chief Mohammed ElBaradei had said that he was concerned over nuclear weapons falling into the hands of a terror group in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

A dirty bomb remains a nightmare scenario for most nations and even though the known nuclear mart of Pakistan's rogue scientist, A Q Khan, has been shut down, efforts of jihadi groups to acquire nuclear weapons continue to cause sleepless nights to security agencies around the world.

In a guarded comment during an interview, Narayanan had said that Pakistan's weapons were "largely safe" even though he added the US was also watching the situation closely.

The PM, who is also best known for being virtually the sole spokesman for the India-US nuclear deal, refused to give up on Monday as well. As he has done before, Manmohan Singh raised the energy argument, saying India did not have the luxury of limiting its energy sources. "Our energy needs will continue to rise in the foreseeable future. We do not have the luxury of limiting our options of energy sources."

He said India wished to create an international environment in which nuclear technology is used not for destructive purposes but for "helping us meet our national development goals and our energy security".

The PM said India would not engage in an arms race. "We have a declared doctrine of no first-use that is based on credible minimum deterrence. We have in place strict controls on export of nuclear and fissile related materials and technology. India has no intention to engage in an arms race with anyone. Above all, India is fully committed to nuclear disarmament that is global, universal and non-discriminatory in nature."

He stressed that pursuit of nuclear disarmament should not blind the world to emergent challenges which pose new threats and challenges to global security. He then referred to the "growing risk that nuclear weapons may be acquired by terrorists or those driven by extreme ideologies".

He also cautioned about the "increasing danger of non-state actors accessing nuclear materials and devices, development of new weapon systems based on emerging technologies which pose challenges to space security and provide new roles for nuclear weapons and the weakening multilateralism even as bilateral arms control processes falter in shifting strategic landscapes. "These observations seemed to be a backhanded way of criticizing China's attempts to weaponize space, as well as the US's recent successful targeting of a de-orbiting satellite.

The PM's speech came in the backdrop of nuclear disarmament suddenly re-entering everybody's radar screens after four former US officials — Sam Nunn, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz and William Perry — made a strong case for it in 2007 and 2008. It has renewed the global momentum to look for ways to disarm the world's existing nuclear powers. The threat, clearly, is states like Iran and North Korea, which are on the precipice.