

Egypt, Russia set to ink nuclear deal



NUCLEAR DEAL: Accord will allow Moscow to join tender for Egypt's first civilian nuclear power station. (Getty Images)

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met with Russian leaders Tuesday to close a deal allowing Moscow to join a tender for Egypt's first civilian nuclear power station.

Mubarak said that after "difficult" negotiations he was ready for the nuclear cooperation agreement, Interfax news agency reported.

Russian president-elect Dmitry Medvedev, who takes over from Vladimir Putin in May, told Mubarak that he expected a "productive partnership" in the nuclear sphere following the agreement, ITAR-TASS news agency reported.

Mubarak was to meet later with Putin.

The nuclear cooperation accord will allow Russia to bid in an international tender for a \$1.5-1.8 billion reactor project on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, first stage in Cairo's programme to reduce energy reliance on gas and oil reserves.

The Kremlin's sales pitch was also to extend to sales of conventional weapons, Russian media reported.

Russia - which is close to completing Iran's controversial first nuclear facility in Bushehr, and also recently signed a contract for a reactor in Bulgaria - is keen to reestablish a commercial and diplomatic presence in the Middle East.

The region was a stronghold of Soviet influence before the end of the Cold War and subsequent surge of US dominance.

Today, weapons sales and nuclear technology are again giving Moscow a foot in the door.

Even if ties are a long way from the days when Middle Eastern elites routinely studied

and trained in the Soviet Union, throngs of sun-seeking Russians are making their own mark by flooding to Egypt's coastal resorts in record numbers.

In an interview with state-owned Rossiiskaya Gazeta daily, Mubarak voiced "full satisfaction with the level of international political consultations between Cairo and Moscow".

"However, since friends must always be open with each other, I must say that I am not as happy with the volume of Russian investment into Egypt's economy," Mubarak added.

"The chief issue on the agenda is the signing of an accord on Russian-Egyptian cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy," the Kommersant daily wrote. The paper added that its sources hinted that "Moscow gave some ground to Cairo and now expects an answer."

The daily added: "Moscow particularly hopes that Cairo will return to buying Russian arms."

The Nezavisimaya daily echoed that theme in its headline: "Cairo is interested in Russian nuclear technologies and [conventional] weapons."

Mubarak arrived in Moscow on Monday and was to leave Wednesday.

His visit came days before an Arab summit scheduled for March 29-30, which has been mired in controversy, with some Arab states saying they will not attend if the Lebanese parliament does not elect a president by then.

Regional heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Egypt have blamed Syria, which was the dominant political and military force in Lebanon for decades, for obstructing the election.