

Experts back Gulf nuclear drive

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NUCLEAR OPTION: A general view of Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant. Regional experts said that nuclear power rather than renewable energy is the best option for Gulf states. (AFP)

Nuclear power rather than renewable sources like the wind or sun are the best option for oil-rich Gulf Arab states to meet growing energy demands, especially if produced collectively, say regional experts.

"Renewable energies are [playing] only a very small part in supplying even those who started [developing them] a long time ago," Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) President Ali Saleh Al-Barrack told a conference in the UAE on Monday.

He said that while Saudi Arabia was conducting research into renewable energies, options such as wind and solar power were either limited or less attractive for technical reasons.

Given the high demand for power and the population growth in the Gulf region, "I think the only immediate solution is nuclear energy," which is the best option in economic and environmental terms, Al-Barrack said.

He dismissed fears of environmental damage from nuclear energy as "driven by Hollywood-style fiction".

"The danger really is from what we are doing now, by adding more and more of this fossil and coal which is destroying the environment and [causing global] warming," he said.

GCC partners Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided in December 2006 to develop a joint nuclear technology programme for peaceful uses and have been in talks with the IAEA.

The move by the pro-Western oil and gas producers came amid concerns over non-Arab Iran's nuclear drive, which has sparked a standoff with Western powers. Some of these, led notably by the US, accuse Tehran of seeking to develop an atomic bomb, a charge Iran denies.

The UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have since concluded bilateral nuclear cooperation deals with the US.

The UAE, which is in the midst of an economic boom, has also signed an agreement with France to receive help to develop civilian nuclear energy.

Saudi Deputy Electricity Minister Saleh Al-Awaji stressed that while Riyadh started studying medical and industrial applications of nuclear technology two decades ago, it was now barely in the process of examining the feasibility of using it to produce power.

"The issue is still at the stage of feasibility studies. The same goes for the GCC [as a bloc]," he told newswire AFP.

The UAE announced last month that it would import enriched uranium for any reactor it builds, ruling out the controversial aspects of Iran's nuclear programme.

But Al-Awaji said other Gulf states need not necessarily follow suit.

"This option [of producing nuclear energy] is still being studied. But if a decision is made to go ahead, each country would have its own circumstances in acquiring fuel sources... within the regulations governing peaceful uses of nuclear energy," he said.

Saudi and Qatari speakers at the conference agreed that it would be more efficient for GCC countries to develop nuclear energy as a bloc.

"I think it's logical, but I don't think it's going to happen," commented Raja Kiwan, an analyst with energy advisers PFC Energy.

Since the GCC signalled an interest in developing civilian nuclear technology in 2006, "each country seems to be pursuing its own track" and talking to various suppliers, he told AFP.

If the current pace continues, the UAE will probably be the first to produce nuclear energy, Kiwan said.

Kiwan said the growth in energy demand in the region will result in a gas deficit in several countries and makes it inevitable that alternative sources of power will be sought.

"Nuclear is probably the most tested and the most applicable source of energy for the [level] of demand growth that this region is going to be seeing over the next 20-25 years," he said.

"Renewable is a fairly new phenomenon in the energy world and it is primarily being led by the private sector - the big international oil companies that are becoming a little bit greener... Renewable energy is a tiny fraction of global consumption."