

## New Zealand reconsidering nuclear ban

ISN SECURITY WATCH (21/11/05) - For the first time since New Zealand established its 21-year-old ban on nuclear materials in its territory, the possibility of lifting the restriction to allow for the development of nuclear power plants to prop up the country's sagging electric generation rates is being discussed.

The US has lobbied hard for a repeal of the ban since it went into force in 1984. The policy prevents the US from using military bases and ports in New Zealand to host nuclear powered jets or submarines or any other vehicles that carry missiles armed with nuclear warheads.

Though few in New Zealand are predicting that the iconic ban will be repealed any time soon, with economic models showing a potential for power blackouts at least until 2008 and probably beyond, the timing of the open discussion is significant.

"There are limits [...] with New Zealand's mostly hydroelectric power generation, which depends a lot on the weather and is having a hard time keeping up with growing demand," a spokesman for the New Zealand National Power Union told ISN Security Watch. "All options are on the table: better conservation, more efficient generation, other power sources. And nuclear power is something else people are discussing."

The National Power Union in August commissioned a white paper to investigate the pros and cons of using nuclear power in New Zealand. The results are not expected before early 2006, but the commissioning of the study itself is already attracting attention.

Earlier this year, outspoken opposition leader Don Brash narrowly missed unseating New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clarke in one of the closest elections in recent memory. Brash ran on a platform that included a more "moderate" stance toward the total nuclear ban.

At best, the nuclear option would be a distant solution in New Zealand. Even if technology and funding were in place and there was absolutely no political opposition to its development, it would take at least dozen years between breaking the ground for a nuclear power facility and seeing the plant produce its first kilowatt hour of electricity.

But in New Zealand, political concerns make the topic much more charged.

"This is really a defining issue for New Zealanders," one newly elected member of parliament told ISN Security Watch, asking not to be further identified. "We are the

country that did not bow to US pressure. We are the country that has a clean environment in part because we are nuclear free.”

The political intricacies of the issue have not stopped the US from renewing its efforts to sway policy. US Ambassador Bill McCormick ruffled feathers in New Zealand when, just after arriving this month, he said Washington no longer considered New Zealand an ally because of the nation’s nuclear-free stance.

McCormick also said that if the country wanted to improve relations with Washington, “the ball was in New Zealand’s court” - a statement interpreted locally to mean that Wellington had to make the first move, ostensibly by reconsidering the ban.

Later, McCormick backtracked, saying that New Zealand was a valuable friend, and he thanked the government for helping in the rebuilding of Iraq and providing peacekeeping troops in Afghanistan. But to many, the damage had been done.

“The comments [from McCormick] proved again that the relationship between New Zealand and the US is based on only one main issue,” an editorial in the New Zealand Herald said after the events took place. “It is a pity that it is an issue so central and important to New Zealand.”

(By Eric J. Lyman in Auckland)

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