

U.S., Criticized for Helping Japan Over Plutonium, Will Stop

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 8— For seven years the United States has been quietly supplying Japan with technology to refine bomb-grade plutonium from breeder reactors, despite the official American position against the export of any technology that helps the spread of nuclear weapons, according to a report issued today by Greenpeace.

Before Greenpeace's news conference was over, the Department of Energy announced that it would end the exports by letting the agreement under which they took place expire at the end of this month.

"The Administration and the department are fully committed to policies and practices constraining proliferation," the department said.

Greenpeace said the exports violated the Nuclear Nonproliferation Act of 1978, and a bilateral agreement signed with Japan the previous year. The exports clearly run counter to the Clinton Administration's goal, announced last year, of phasing out the production of new weapons fuel. They would also appear to undercut American arguments to the North Koreans that there is no reason for additional states in the North Pacific to develop nuclear weapons technology.

Asked whether Greenpeace was correct that the exports violated American law, Michael G. Gauldin, a spokesman for the department, said, "We think it's a valid question." He said the exports were "a remnant of the last Administration," and he said the Clinton Administration's policy was not to export reprocessing technology to anyone.

The Energy Department said it would complete "a comprehensive review" within 60 days. A Greenpeace researcher, Shaun L. Burnie, said that under the nonproliferation act, the Government was supposed to evaluate the process to determine whether it was a "sensitive nuclear technology," but the evaluation had not been carried out.

The technology in question, which Greenpeace said was developed at American nuclear weapons plants, is a chemical and mechanical system for separating the plutonium made in breeder reactors from waste products. Japan insists that its breeder program is meant to produce fuel for nuclear reactors, not bombs. But the plutonium produced by its two breeders, Monju and Joyo, is a kind that is particularly well-suited to bombs, Greenpeace said.

Whatever the intended use of the plutonium, the United States has previously expressed discomfort at the proliferation risk posed by separating the plutonium produced in civilian

nuclear reactors from spent reactor fuel. It dropped its own breeder reactor program a decade ago. In the 1960's some fuel from conventional reactors was recovered for reuse in this country, but the technology was banned in this country by the Carter Administration 17 years ago.

Nearly all reactors produce plutonium. Conventional reactors, using uranium and ordinary water, produce some plutonium but consume uranium faster. Breeders produce more nuclear fuel than they consume. But the plutonium must still be separated after it is produced, before it can be reused in another reactor.

Britain and France reprocess such fuel on a commercial basis, and Russia is seeking to, but those countries already have nuclear weapons.

All three of those countries have also reprocessed some fuel from breeder reactors. And Japan could develop the technology on its own, if it wanted to.

Mr. Burnie pointed out that the Nonproliferation Treaty is up for renewal next year and that the United States and Japan are two of its strongest backers. Now, he said, those two countries "are revealed to have engaged in illegal nuclear commerce."

Last June a former Prime Minister of Japan, Tsutomu Hata, set off a domestic furor when he said that "Japan has the capability to produce nuclear weapons, but it has not made them." Japan is the only country to have been the target of nuclear weapons, 49 years ago last month.