

Brazil Starts Enriching Own Uranium. Something Iran Wants Too.

Contributed by O.Ch.
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Brazil has inaugurated a uranium enrichment center, capable of producing the kind of nuclear fuel that Iran wants to make despite international pressure not to.

Brazilian Science and Technology Minister Sergio Rezende told the government news agency Agência Brasil the enrichment center would save Brazil millions of dollars it now spends to enrich fuel at Urenco, the European enrichment consortium.

Rezende stressed Brazil's commitment to the peaceful use of nuclear energy at a ceremony Friday, May 5, at the plant, built on a former coffee plantation in Resende, 90 miles west of Rio de Janeiro.

The Brazilian Constitution bans the military use of nuclear energy, and the country has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

The enriched uranium will fuel Brazil's Angra 1 and Angra 2 nuclear plants near Rio de Janeiro, Rezende said. Angra 3 is still under construction, and the government expects it to come online in 2013.

The government-run nuclear company Indústrias Nucleares do Brasil SA says the plant will be capable of enriching natural uranium to less than 5% uranium-235, an isotope needed to fuel its reactors.

Warheads need ore that has been enriched to 95 percent uranium-235, a material Brazil says it can't and won't produce.

The government raised eyebrows in 2004 when it refused unrestricted inspections by the International Atomic Energy Association, arguing that providing full access to its state-of-the-art centrifuges would put it at risk of industrial espionage.

But inspectors said they were satisfied after monitoring the uranium that comes in and out of the centrifuges, which were covered with opaque screens.

Brazil's nuclear program began during a 1964-85 military dictatorship, and the ruling generals had secret plans to test an atomic bomb underground in the Amazon jungle.

That idea was formally scrapped in 1990, and former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell declared in 2004 that "we know for sure that Brazil is not thinking about nuclear weapons in any sense."

Brazil has the world's sixth-largest uranium reserves, but has been unable to use the fuel for energy without shipping it to and from Urenco.

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