

Environmentalists slam Malaysia's nuclear ambition
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Environmentalists are questioning the need for a nuclear power plant, slated to be set up and in operation by year 2021.

Global Environment Centre director Faizal Parish (left) said that the fad for nuclear energy started about 40 years ago when almost every developed country jumped on the nuclear bandwagon.

"Since then they have all stopped because of major problems faced with the maintenance, safety, transportation of the fuel and disposal of the radioactive waste of the material.

"The plants are certainly expensive to build and construct, and even more expensive to decommission. And we are all well aware of the safety problems of the nuclear reactors," said the renewable energy expert.

He also rubbished claims that a nuclear power plant would lower the country's carbon emissions.

"While it is true that nuclear energy itself has almost no carbon emission, the construction and building of the plant facilities itself will cause a lot of carbon emissions," he said.

Faizal also said that while most countries have stopped developing more nuclear plants, it is only a commercial decision for nuclear companies to look for markets in other developing countries.

"But of course, these companies can sometimes be very persuasive with their billion-dollar projects. And we know that the government has a preference for large projects instead of saving money," he said.

Renewable energy

NONThe money could be better channelled to developing other renewable energy sources, continued Faizal.

"The cost of solar energy is coming down all the time. This is compared to the cost of nuclear energy which is on the upward trend," he said, adding that Malaysia's sunny climate is perfect for such technology.

He also said that at the moment, there is little investment in the renewable energy sector with only five percent of the country's energy resources derived from it.

Centre For Environment, Technology And Development Malaysia (Cetdem) chairman Gurmit Singh (right) also agreed and said that other options should have been taking into consideration before going ahead with the plans.

"We have said it many times that the country has a vast energy potential which have not been fully explored. Even the government has not come up with a proper energy policy," he said.

He also said that there were other renewable alternatives, such as generating kinetic energy from ocean waves.

"There are already studies that the ocean off the coast of Sabah can generate 50,000 MW. The nuclear plant can only generate 1,000 MW, and carries so many risks."

Nuclear disaster

Gurmit cited the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the world's worst nuclear accident, as the worst case scenario.

"With our Malaysian mentality regarding maintenance, it is so easy to have a leak in the reactor," he said.

nuclear power plant reactor fusion 040309 01He added that there is still no safe way to dispose radioactive waste to date, and that future generations could be exposed to its dangers, considering that the half-life of the waste is up to thousands of years.

He also challenged to government to provide proof of a disposal plan of the nuclear waste.

Faizal added that with the current frequency of earthquakes in the region, even neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines have abandoned their nuclear ambitions.

Gurmit also said that other steps can be taken to conserve energy, such as educating the public on how to use energy wisely.

"First, of course, people will have to start learning how to use energy more efficiently," he said.

He also attributed to the wasteful habit of Malaysians to the relatively cheap energy pricing.

"Electricity is subsidised so people don't bother to save. And this power reactor, will also definitely be subsidised. What is the actual cost of this reactor, and what is the energy efficiency?" he asked.

Public feedback

He added that the government's announcement caught him by surprise, since they had maintained that they were still seeking public feedback.

"But it looks like they have stopped collecting public feedback and going ahead with it anyway," he said.

"We don't really know what is going on. We don't know if they are really going ahead with the nuclear reactor plant, or just going ahead with more studies.

peter chin"Since last year, we have been challenging Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Peter Chin Fah Kui (right) to a public debate.

"We are not convinced of his argument that (setting up a nuclear plant) is the only way to ensure energy security," said Gurmit.

Chin had previously said that a nuclear plant was sorely needed to meet the country's accelerating energy needs and ensure its energy security in view of depleting resources and soaring oil prices.

Malaysia's generation capacity is about 23,000MW currently, while consumption is 14,000MW, and will reach a critical point by 2017 with 20 per cent in reserves.

He was reported to have said that the plant, which is estimated to take 10 years to build and costing RM10 billion, must be ready before energy consumption touches dangerous levels.

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