

international news

Canada's reply to Indian nuclear explosion

David Spurgeon, Ottawa

CANADA has responded quickly and firmly to India's explosion of an underground nuclear device. External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp announced four days after the weekend's test that Canada has suspended all nuclear assistance and cooperation and recalled Atomic Energy of Canada Limited's resident representative.

Mr Sharp said that the Canadian government is very disturbed by the tests, in which a device of approximately 15 kilotons yield was reported to have been exploded at a depth of 100 metres. "For all intents and purposes", he told a press conference, "India now has developed the capability of producing a nuclear weapon".

Canada's concern has resulted from the likelihood that the plutonium used in the explosive device came from a reactor named CIRRUS that was a gift from Canada. Canada has also designed and helped to build and equip two electric power reactors at Rajasthan (Rapp I and Rapp II), and most of India's nuclear personnel have been trained in Canada.

Canada has long been fearful of India's nuclear intentions. Copies of correspondence between Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October 1971, which were distributed at the press conference, reveal Canada's concern at that time for the prevention of proliferation of nuclear weapons.

"The use of Canadian supplied material, equipment and facilities in India, that is, at CIRRUS, Rapp I or Rapp II or fissile material from these reactors, for the development of a nuclear explosive device would inevitably call on our part for a reassessment of our nuclear cooperation arrangements with India, a position we would take with any other non-nuclear weapons state with which we had cooperation arrangements in the nuclear field", Mr Trudeau warned.

"My government", replied Mrs Gandhi, "reiterates its commitment to the provisions contained in the nuclear cooperation agreements between India

and Canada to which your government is also committed. Our two governments have acted in conformity with these arrangements for the past several years. The obligations undertaken by our two governments are mutual and they cannot be unilaterally varied".

What appears to have let the Indians off the hook, at least in their own minds, is their interpretation of the underground device they exploded as a "peaceful use" of nuclear energy. This interpretation has never been shared by Canada, but it seems to have been India's all along. Canada signed the Nonproliferation Treaty but India refused on the grounds that it was "discriminatory".

Canada did win inspection provisions for the two Rapp power reactors by the International Atomic Energy Authority but there were no such provisions for the CIRRUS reactor. CIRRUS seems the most likely source of plutonium for the device. For other reasons: AECL officials say that the one Rapp reactor now running has not been operating long enough to produce sufficient plutonium for an explosive device. The Rapp reactors are of the Candu type, fuelled with natural uranium and they are not ideal for producing weapons grade material in any case.

The CIRRUS was initially fuelled by Canada but subsequent fuel was manufactured by the Indians themselves, according to Canadian officials. The Indian fuel was not subject to inspection. Thus the plutonium for the device could have come from the Indian fuel and have been separated out in India's reprocessing plant, which has been operating since 1964. In fact, press reports in India were said by a spokesman in Canada's Department of External Affairs to have quoted Indian officials as saying that this was the case.

Asked for his personal reaction to news of the explosion, J. L. Gray, President of AECL, said quite frankly "I was really quite surprised and very disappointed". Gray suggested that halting Canada's nuclear assistance at this point will have little effect on India's nuclear power programme. "It might delay them but it won't stop their programme," he said. One of the Canadian-built Rapp reactors is already running, the other is nearly finished and India is building four more of its own.

In future Canada will try to assure that there is no ambiguity about the

meaning of the phrase "peaceful uses" in agreements with other countries. But it is not clear how that will be accomplished for Mr Trudeau's 1971 letter to Mrs Gandhi seemed clear enough. Mr Sharp said that Canada "made it clear in international discussions and in bilateral exchanges with India that the creation of a nuclear explosion for so-called peaceful purposes could not be considered as a peaceful purpose within the meaning of our cooperative arrangements".

India's action has also brought up the question of Canada's aid programme to that country in general. Mr Sharp said that Canada is conscious of the very large costs involved in the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and appreciates the substantial resources needed for the development of explosive devices. "Canada does not intend to share the burden of relieving such costs" he said. Thus the Canadian government is not prepared to agree to any roll over of India's commercial debt to Canada which is largely related to her nuclear energy programme.

Apart from the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation, many Canadian officials have found it hard to understand the rationale of putting a high priority on an expensive nuclear device which has a questionable utility while such vital national problems as assuring an adequate food supply continue to go unresolved. Indian spokesmen said the device was needed to aid in developing new energy sources, but understood nuclear devices have not been notably successful in such uses, even in the United States.

Oil from Russia?

from our Soviet Correspondent

SPEAKING in London recently, Academician Vladimir A. Kirilin, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and Chairman of its State Committee for Science and Technology, called for cooperation between Britain and the USSR over energy matters—both in nuclear energy and oil production.

The occasion was the third meeting of the Permanent UK/USSR Intergovernmental Commission for Cooperation in the fields of Applied Science, Technology, Trade and Economic Relations. Mr Peter Shore, Secretary of State for Trade led the United Kingdom delegation and pre-