



PRESS RELEASE

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Referendum on uranium mining in Greenland must include the Kvanefjeld project

On Wednesday April 27th, a referendum on uranium mining is on the agenda in the Greenlandic Parliament, Inatsisartut. Two and a half years ago, the uranium ban was lifted by only a one-vote-majority. Two proposals will have their first reading: One from Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA), which will make it possible to stop the enormous Kvanefjeld uranium mining project near the town of Narsaq in Southern Greenland, and one from Atassut, which will not. A proposal from Partii Naleraq, which could also block the Kvanefjeld project, will have its first reading on May 12th [1].

“Uranium mining has been such a divisive issue in Greenland, that a referendum on a reintroduction of the uranium zero-tolerance is a democratic necessity”, says Mikkel Myrup, chairman of Avataq, Greenland’s Nature & Environment Association. “But if it is to be more than play to the gallery, it must have consequences for the Kvanefjeld project, which is the only uranium mining project in the near and mid-term. Just the scale of the project justifies a referendum. Even though uranium is mentioned as a by-product to the extraction of the rare earth minerals, it is still a fact that Kvanefjeld in addition to the world’s largest deposit of thorium also contains the world’s second largest deposit of uranium”. [2]

Some of the principal arguments against a referendum are that the owner of Kvanefjeld, the Australian mining company *Greenland Minerals and Energy Ltd (GMEL)*, will have to be awarded damages, if the company is not allowed to mine uranium, and that it will be more difficult for Greenland to attract investors to the minerals sector in the future. None of these arguments are valid: GMEL has had no reason to expect that a referendum will not take place, considering that it has been promoted by four of the five political parties currently represented in Inatsisartut [3]. Furthermore, GMEL only has an exploration, not an extraction license and a uranium ban would not prevent the company from extracting the rare earth minerals.

“If a referendum results in a reinstatement of the uranium ban, Greenland’s standing in the investor community will not be diminished”, says Erik Jensen from NOAH Friends of the Earth Denmark’s Uranium Group. “On the contrary, it would indicate that Greenland is a society founded on the rule of law that is not willing to compromise public health, the environment or its independence just to benefit influential mining companies. A ban would also make good economic sense, considering that uranium mining harms important industries such as fishing, hunting, agriculture and tourism. Recently, a prominent expert on uranium mining even stated that in some countries the clean-up costs exceed the earnings”. [4]

“When hopefully a referendum on uranium mining is held very soon, it is important that sufficient funds are allocated for neutral information on its health-related, social, economic and environmental impacts”, says Mariane Paviassen, Chairwoman of The URANI NAAMIK/NO TO URANIUM Society in Narsaq. “In Narsaq, where we suffer most of the negative consequences of the Kvanefjeld project, we have not yet been properly informed on its health and environmental impacts. During the three so-called uranium information tours organised by the government to inform the public on uranium mining, these impacts have been played systematically down”.

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Notes:

[1] IA’s proposal: <http://kortlink.dk/inatsisartut/m383>
Atassut’s proposal: <http://kortlink.dk/inatsisartut/m384>
Partii Naleraq’s proposal: <http://kortlink.dk/inatsisartut/m385>

[2] Only the deposit at the Australian Olympic Dam uranium mine is bigger. It should be noted that the Ilimaussaq-complex is not fully explored and the resources probably are larger. See: GMEL, Kvanefjeld Presentation, Greenland Day PDAC Toronto, March 3rd 2014, p. 4:
https://www.govmin.gl/images/stories/minerals/events/pdac_2014/Presentations/09_GMEL_PDAC_2014.pdf

[3] The four parties are Siumut, IA, Atassut and Partii Naleraq. Regarding Siumut, the then Prime Minister Aleqa Hammond promised a consultative referendum in Southern Greenland on the Kvanefjeld project in her 2013 inaugural address. The promise was repeated in the last speech she held in Parliament in 2014, the day before a new general election was called and subsequently won by the government. See: Inaugural address, 13 September 2013, p. 22-24: <http://kortlink.dk/naalakkersuisut/k5v9> Opening speech, 30 September 2014, p. 28-29: <http://kortlink.dk/naalakkersuisut/k5u9>

[4] Former Senior Researcher Gerhard Schmidt from Öko-Institut recently gave a presentation at a hearing in the Danish Parliament's Greenland Committee, according to which the Kvanefjeld mining project does not live up to the basic environmental requirements of the European Mining Waste Directive. He also pointed out that the clean-up costs after uranium mining in Germany amount to 8 billion euros and will have to be paid by the German taxpayers. That is equivalent to 36 euros per produced kg uranium, which is more than the current market price. See: Gerhard Schmidt, Environmental and health impacts of uranium mining in Greenland, March 2016, p. 6: <http://noah.dk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Gerhard-Schmidt-presentation-2016-3-16.pdf>