

Global powers eye our uranium



GROWTH: Alexander Downer with BHP's Paul Dunn at Olympic Dam yesterday. Picture: MORNE DE KLERK

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THREE of the world's richest countries yesterday signalled their interest in fuelling new nuclear power plants with Olympic Dam uranium as 51 ambassadors visited the giant Far North mine.

Starting a three-day tour of South Australia escorted by Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer, Australia's diplomatic corps spent yesterday morning studying the BHP Billiton mine and being briefed on its expansion, which would create 3000 jobs.

The Chinese, U.S. and British envoys said their countries needed more uranium to fuel the next generation of nuclear plants, which were being installed to curb climate change and bolster energy security.

BHP is considering a multi-billion-dollar expansion of Roxby Downs from 2009, which would expand uranium production from 4000 tonnes to 15,000 tonnes annually.

Copper production would

expand from 200,000 tonnes annually to 600,000 tonnes, mainly spurred by growing demand from China.

Chinese Ambassador Zhang Junsai said China's plan to build new nuclear reactors was "closely related to climate change".

"We have some uranium deposits back in China (but) if we develop the nuclear power stations we might need more," he said.

United Kingdom High Commissioner Helen Liddell said Britain's decision to develop a new generation of nuclear power stations had been mainly prompted by a need to secure energy supplies.

"We see the expansion by BHP as giving great confidence that there will be a ready supply of uranium into the future," she said.

Mr Downer said it was incredible that Labor strongly supported exporting uranium to fuel nuclear plants across the world yet refused to even debate the prospect of nuclear power in Australia.

"If the economics stack up, a nuclear power plant could be very good for Australia," he said.