



OBAMA SAYS WORLD MOVING QUICKLY ON IRAN SANCTIONS

By Ross Colvin and Reza Derakhshi



WASHINGTON/TEHRAN (Reuters) - President Barack Obama said on Tuesday the international community was moving "fairly quickly" toward imposing broader sanctions on Iran, as the Islamic Republic defiantly expanded its nuclear program.

Obama said Iran's refusal to accept a U.N.-brokered atomic fuel swap deal suggested it was intent on trying to build nuclear weapons, despite its insistence that its nuclear program was only for the peaceful generation of electricity.

Obama came into office vowing to break with the Bush administration's policy of seeking to isolate Iran. But he has taken a tougher stance since disputed elections there last June and the passing of his December deadline for Tehran to accept the deal proposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the U.N. nuclear watchdog.

Iran defied international pressure by announcing over the weekend that it would enrich uranium to 20 percent purity for a reactor making isotopes for cancer patients. Iran on Tuesday announced the work had begun.

Obama said the door was still open for Iran to enter into negotiations with major powers on its nuclear program. But he made clear the United States was now focused on sanctions.

"What we are going to be working on over the next several weeks is developing a significant regime of sanctions that will indicate to them how isolated they are from the international community as a whole," Obama told reporters in Washington.

"It's moving along fairly quickly," Obama said when asked about how quickly the sanctions effort was proceeding.

The big powers already have stepped up discussions on possible next moves. Russia sent its strongest signal yet that

it could back a fourth set of U.N. sanctions over Iran's nuclear program.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates told Fox News: "I think it's going to take some period of time -- I would say weeks, not months -- to see if we can't get another U.N. Security Council resolution."

Obama said any new Security Council resolution would be part of a broader sanctions effort.

"We are going to be looking at a variety of ways in which countries indicate to Iran that their approach is unacceptable," he said.

Possible targets for any new sanctions include Iran's central bank, the Revolutionary Guards, who Western powers say are key to Iran's nuclear program, shipping firms and its energy sector, Western diplomats say.

MEDICAL ISOTOPE

Russia, which in the past has urged talks rather than sanctions, said Iran's new enrichment drive was a clear breach of U.N. resolutions and that Western concerns over Iran's true nuclear intentions were well-founded.

"Political-diplomatic methods are important for a resolution, but there is a limit to everything," said Nikolai Patrushev, powerful secretary of the presidential Security Council, according to Interfax news agency.

Among the big powers only China, which can block any U.N. sanctions, has remained unswervingly opposed to punishing Iran. On Tuesday it urged increased diplomatic efforts, calling for all sides to work toward a deal on the fuel exchange plan.

"How China operates at the Security Council as we pursue sanctions is something that we're going to have to see," Obama said, while praising Russia for its "forward-leaning" approach to Iran.

Iranian State television quoted Iranian nuclear agency chief Ali Akbar Salehi as saying the process of producing higher-enriched uranium at the Natanz facility had begun under the supervision of the IAEA.

It showed footage of him giving the order via computer and scientists and officials around him shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest).

The enrichment followed a failure to agree on a swap with major powers, under which Iran would have sent most of its



REUTERS

low-enriched uranium abroad in return for 20-percent-pure fuel rods for the reactor producing medical isotopes.

U.S. officials said this week Washington was prepared to help Iran obtain medical isotopes from third-country sources, calling it a "faster, cheaper and more responsible alternative" to the IAEA proposal than the Iranian government's.

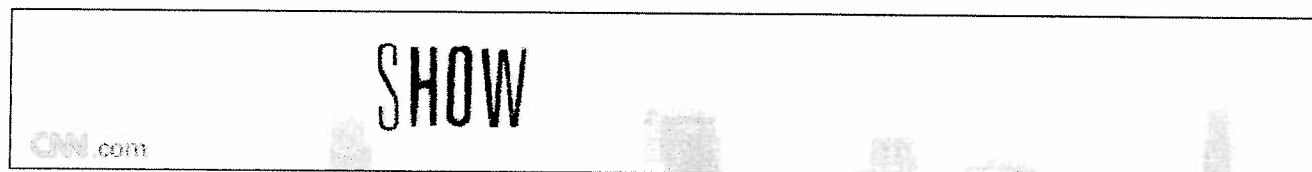

Iran currently enriches uranium to 3.5 percent purity.

Salehi said Iran had set up a chain of 164 centrifuges to refine the uranium to 20 percent purity. Production capacity was 3 to 5 kg a month, above the Tehran reactor's needs of 1.5 kg, ISNA news agency reported.

Centrifuges that had enriched to 3.5 percent would need to be recalibrated for 20 percent production -- preparatory work that would normally take a month or two. A diplomat close to the IAEA said inspectors had noticed no such preparations before Monday.

Although a nuclear bomb requires about 90 percent purity, getting to 20 percent is a big step because low-level enrichment is the most time-consuming and difficult stage of the process.

(Additional reporting by Parisa Hafezi and Hossein Jaseb in Tehran, Chris Buckley in Beijing and Steve Holland in Washington; Editing by Will Dunham)

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Iran resumes nuclear weapon work, U.S. report expected to say

By Pam Benson, CNN National Security Producer

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Official says intelligence assessment revises 2007 claims that Iran stopped work
- Iran focused on weaponization research, not development, official says
- Expert says Iran is trying to copy others' work
- Developments have given Obama administration new reason for criticism

Washington (CNN) -- A soon-to-be completed U.S. assessment of Iran's nuclear program is expected to conclude that the government has resumed limited work on a nuclear weapon, according to a U.S. official.

Such a conclusion in the new National Intelligence Assessment would revise a controversial assessment released in 2007 that said Iran had stopped its weaponization program in 2003. Many Western intelligence services disagreed with the U.S. conclusion at the time.

The U.S. official -- who is familiar with the report but is not authorized to speak on the record because of the sensitive nature of the information -- said the new assessment "will move forward a tad" Iranian efforts on weaponization. The official says Iran is now focused on research of a program as opposed to full-blown development of a nuclear warhead: "The emphasis is on the 'R,' not the 'D.' "

Nuclear weapons expert David Albright disagrees, maintaining that the Iranians don't need to do their own research because it has been done by other nations.

"They are trying to copy, to learn how to make weapons based on what they know from others. This is development," he said.

But even as Iran continues to develop various nuclear capabilities that it says are for peaceful purposes, both Albright and Obama's director of national intelligence, Dennis Blair, say they believe that it has not made the political decision to move forward and actually build nuclear weapons.

Recent actions by Iran, however, have given the Obama administration new ammunition to support its contention that Iran intends to produce nuclear weapons eventually, a move the United States believes would destabilize the Middle East.

At a news conference on Tuesday, President Obama chastised the Iran leadership, saying that "despite their posturing that their nuclear power is only for civilian use, that they in fact continue to pursue a course that would lead to weaponization."

Two events reinforced the administration's position.

Last week, Iran said it had launched a satellite into space for telecommunication and research purposes.

Then on Sunday, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that his government would begin enriching uranium to a level of 20 percent at its Natanz enrichment facility for use in a medical research reactor.

Iran had been enriching uranium to a very low level of 3.5 percent but needed a higher level of enrichment to produce medical isotopes.

The International Atomic Energy Agency appeared to have brokered a deal with Iran to send its low-enriched uranium to Russia or France for conversion to fuel rods that could be used in its medical reactor. But Iran backed out of the deal.

Albright said Iran's decision to pursue the enrichment itself puts the country on a path to produce fissile material needed for a nuclear weapon. Although 90 percent enrichment is needed for a bomb, Albright said, "once they successfully obtain 20 percent enrichment, they are 90 percent on the way to being able to produce weapons-grade uranium."

The U.S. director of national intelligence tied Iran's satellite launch to its efforts to improve its ballistic long-range missile force. Blair recently said at a congressional hearing that the Iranian launch "enhances its power projection and provides Tehran the means for delivering a possible nuclear payload."

He said there are other indications that Tehran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons and pointed to the public disclosure last fall of a secret second enrichment facility near the city of Qom.

The intelligence community is looking for signs of other unknown enrichment facilities since the Iranians tried to hide the Qom plant by building it into a mountain.

Albright, who is founder and president of the Institute for Science and International Security, believes that the discovery of the Qom facility has set back Iranian efforts.

He says Qom "would most likely have been the breakout facility" for nuclear weapons production.

He doubts Iran would use Natanz, which is under the watchful eye of the IAEA, to produce weapons-grade uranium.

"Iran needs a secret facility to do so, mostly out of fear of a commando raid by the Israelis," he said.

It is unlikely, Albright adds, that Iran has a third enrichment plant in the works, because its "resources are strained. ... Iran doesn't have a deep enough bench of nuclear scientists and experts."

Officials and experts believe the Natanz facility has also had its share of problems. Albright said Iran has "struggled" with getting the performance from the centrifuges that is needed for enrichment.

A new report issued by Albright's think tank states, "Iran has moved too quickly to install centrifuges at the expense of developing competence in operating them reliably. In the process, it has made many mistakes."

The report says Iran might have experienced a number of problems resulting from outdated centrifuge parts, impurities in domestic uranium stock, operational instabilities and possibly sabotage.

Blair told Congress that although Iran has significantly increased its number of centrifuges at Natanz over the past two years, only about half of them work. He said Iran "has had problems operating those centrifuges, which has constrained the production of low and rich uranium."

But despite a number of problems with its program, the director of national intelligence said, "Iran has the scientific, technical [and] industrial capacity to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a weapon in the next few years."

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The Miami Herald

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Iran suppresses protests as leader proclaims nuclear state'

By WARREN P. STROBEL
McClatchy Newspapers

Iran's government smothered Tehran and other major cities with security forces Thursday, overwhelming opposition protesters who gathered in small groups despite threats of repression on the 31st anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution.

State security forces attacked one of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's political opponents, former parliament speaker Mehdi Karroubi, and the wife of another, Mir Hossein Mousavi, according to opposition Web sites and other accounts that filtered out of the country despite government efforts to restrict and monitor Internet traffic.

Video accounts posted on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites showed helmeted riot police using tear gas and batons to prevent large crowds from gathering.

One widely circulated video showed a member of the riot police choking and punching a shirtless man. Before the 20-second clip ends, a woman dressed in traditional black walks up, points an accusatory finger at the policeman and remonstrates with him.

The show of force seemed intended to demonstrate, both to Iranians and to the West, that the leaders of Iran's Islamic Republic are firmly in charge eight months after a disputed presidential election sparked the country's deepest political crisis since 1979.

With most foreign journalists barred from Iraq, and Internet and other media tightly controlled, it's not possible to independently verify some of the accounts.

However, one of Karroubi's sons, Mohammed Taghi Karroubi, told the BBC Persian service that his father was sprayed in the face with tear gas and hit with a stone when he tried to join the protesters.

Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who campaigned last year with her husband, was beaten and kicked by plainclothes police, according to Kaleme, an opposition Web site.

The crushing display of force appeared to be a setback for Iran's "green movement," as the protesters are known. Yet the movement, named after the color used in Mousavi's campaign, has proved resilient, and video clips showed opposition crowds gathered not just in Tehran, but also in other major cities. In Isfahan, crowds were shown shouting "Death to (Supreme Leader Ali) Khamanei."

Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, spoke to a huge pro-government throng in Tehran's Azadi, or Freedom, Square. In the past, the government has bused thousands of its supporters into Tehran from the provinces, often providing free meals and other enticements.

Ahmadinejad also used the symbolic occasion to claim that Iran is now a "nuclear state," a boast that U.S. government and private experts called wildly exaggerated.

The Iranian president announced that Iran's nuclear scientists have succeeded in enriching uranium to 20 percent purity, closer to the 80 percent enrichment needed to make a nuclear weapon.

"Iran has made a series of statements that are far more political than they are. They're based on politics, not on physics," responded White House spokesman Robert Gibbs.

"The Iranian nuclear program has undergone a series of problems throughout the year," Gibbs said. "We do not believe they have the capability to enrich to the degree to which they now say they are enriching."

David Albright, an expert on Iran's nuclear program at the Institute for Science and International Security, said earlier this week that Iran has the technical ability to produce uranium enriched to near 20 percent. He cast doubt, however, on Iran's claim that it could begin doing so immediately.

While Thursday's protests against Ahmadinejad were smaller than predicted, senior U.S. officials say that the government and its opponents are in for a long-term standoff, with neither side able to prevail.

Mehdi Noorbaksh, an associate professor at Harrisburg University in Pennsylvania, said Iran's opposition is engaged in "a war of attrition," hoping to encourage defections of Iranian diplomats and middle-ranking members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who are unhappy with the government.

"I'm very positive," said Noorbaksh, whose father-in-law, Ebrahim Yazdi, was foreign minister in the interim government that followed the Shah's fall in 1979 and has been in jail since late December. "It is a long struggle."

(Staff writer Steven Thomma contributed to this report.)