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Inside Obama Administration, A Tug Of War Over Nuclear Warheads

By Elaine M. Grossman, Global Security Newswire

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden in early June blocked a Defense Department bid to revive a defunct program aimed at fielding modern nuclear warheads across the strategic arsenal, according to those familiar with the episode.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates raised the idea of reinstating the controversial Reliable Replacement Warhead effort during a secret "Principals' Committee" meeting convened by the National Security Council, *Global Security Newswire* has learned.

In pursuing the initiative, Gates appears to have won the backing of some pivotal Cabinet secretaries, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. One administration-watcher -- a critic of the replacement-warhead idea -- alleges that several key appointees at the Defense and State departments are now "scheming and maneuvering" to bring the controversial program back to life.

However, Biden has strongly opposed the move, based on the view that pursuing a new U.S. warhead program could undermine Washington's efforts to discourage nuclear weapons proliferation around the globe.

The issue remains unresolved, according to a wide array of policy officials and experts.

Under the RRW project, government officials said they intended to design new warheads that could make the aging nuclear arsenal more safe, secure and reliable -- without adding new military capabilities or resuming explosive testing. However, Congress eliminated funding for the Bush administration initiative for the past two fiscal years and, this year, President Barack Obama omitted the program from his fiscal 2010 budget request.

Lawmakers have charged that warhead replacement could damage U.S. counterproliferation objectives by making it appear that Washington was backtracking on its commitment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to reduce and ultimately eliminate its own large arsenal.

The proposed alternative is to continue the ongoing program to refurbish and reuse existing warheads through the National Nuclear Security Administration's Stockpile Stewardship effort. That approach involves extending the service lives of aging warheads rather than building new weapons to replace them.

Nuclear weapons experts are engaged in an increasingly heated debate over whether stewardship will be enough to maintain confidence in the vintage warheads, particularly as a voluntary U.S. moratorium on explosive testing enters its third decade. The average warhead in the current arsenal is roughly 20 years old.

Two years ago, a U.S. government advocate of nuclear warhead modernization said age-related failures in the arsenal are a serious concern, but one that would not likely manifest for 20 or more years.

U.S. nuclear-design personnel have warned that successive refurbishments of existing weapons "may pose an unacceptable risk to maintaining the long-term reliability of the stockpile, absent nuclear testing," John Harvey, then head of NNSA policy planning, said in June 2007. However, he hastened to add, "[By saying] 'long term,' I'm not talking about two, three, four or five years. I'm talking about two [or] three decades."

In denying funding for the RRW program last year, Congress said it might reconsider warhead replacement, but only after the administration shows how such an effort would fit into an overarching nuclear weapons strategy.

The Pentagon is undertaking a broad assessment of strategy, forces and readiness called the Nuclear Posture Review, due for completion by the end of the year. Among the issues to be assessed is the "nuclear weapons stockpile that will be required for implementing the United States' national and military strategy, including any plans for replacing or modifying warheads," according to a Defense Department fact sheet.

Obama Team Weighs In

The conflict between Gates and Biden came to a head at the June meeting of the Principals' Committee, a White House forum in which top national security officials consider major policy issues. Sources would describe the meeting only on condition of not being named because they were not authorized to discuss the sensitive subject publicly.

Spokesmen for Biden and Gates would not confirm any details of the meeting, which sources said took place during the second week of June. A National Security Council spokesman declined to reveal the date on which the Principals' Committee met.

Nuclear stockpile modernization was not on the official agenda for the high-level gathering, which centered instead on preparing a U.S. negotiating position for arms control talks with Moscow, according to sources.

Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in July announced they had agreed to nuclear-warhead and delivery-vehicle reductions for a new accord, which they hope will replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty before it expires in December.

During the interagency meeting, Gates reportedly volunteered that a warhead-replacement effort would be vital to maintaining the nuclear arsenal's viability, particularly after additional arms control reductions are taken.

Gen. James Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, provided Gates backup at the meeting, according to these sources. Formerly the top combatant commander for strategic nuclear weapons, the Marine Corps general expressed concern that today's arsenal incorporates vacuum tubes and other outdated technologies that should be replaced, sources told *GSN*.

Through a spokesman, Cartwright declined comment for this article.

His successor at U.S. Strategic Command, Gen. Kevin Chilton, stirred some controversy this spring after voicing similar worries about vacuum tubes. Nuclear-weapon experts have cast doubt on the notion that the vintage technology constitutes a valid basis for a warhead-replacement program, because it is used sparingly in the arsenal and could easily be tested and replaced, if needed.

Clinton, also at the June meeting, joined in supporting Gates by noting that a U.S. nuclear modernization program that includes warhead replacement might be necessary for domestic political reasons, according to sources. Specifically, she argued it might be necessary for the Obama administration to embark on an ambitious warhead modernization effort if it is to win enough Republican support for Senate ratification of the START replacement pact, according to sources.

A similar quid pro quo, according to conservative thinkers, might also be necessary next year for Senate approval of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, another objective Obama laid out in his Prague speech. "Then you can have your cake and eat it, too," one senior Senate aide said last week.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu, whose agency maintains the atomic stockpile via its semiautonomous National Nuclear Security Administration and took the lead in planning the RRW program, reportedly weighed in on the June discussion with a modest show of support, saying that replacement warheads might be needed.

Though James Steinberg, Clinton's deputy, volunteered that Obama should be consulted before his administration changes course on warhead replacement, it was left to the vice president to express full-throated opposition, sources said.

Biden raised the notion that an ambitious nuclear modernization effort that includes building replacement warheads could undercut the Obama administration's nonproliferation goals, according to these sources. Most importantly, Washington is attempting to build international consensus against Iran's suspected pursuit of nuclear weapons and North Korea's maintenance of its nascent arsenal.

Biden reportedly argued that the international community would almost certainly cry foul on a replacement-warhead effort, particularly given Obama's pledge to work toward the long-term elimination of nuclear weapons around the world. This spring, Obama tapped Biden to lead the administration's nonproliferation initiatives.

As a presidential candidate during the Democratic primary campaign, Biden raised other pointed questions about the RRW effort. The former Delaware senator in 2007 alleged the warhead-replacement project had been "hijacked" by those seeking to maintain a bloated nuclear arms establishment, and should be jettisoned in favor of maintaining the existing stockpile.

A First Test

Few expect the Principals' Committee exchange to represent the final word on the warhead-replacement matter.

Gates' behind-the-scenes attempt in June to resuscitate the idea, experts said, was a first real test of whether Obama as president would maintain his opposition to "rushing to produce a new generation of warheads," as he said during last year's campaign.

Even with Biden serving as a backstop against an RRW revival, Obama's national security team remains split over the matter and it is not certain which side will prevail.

"It's not clear where we're going to go [on the warhead issue]," one senior Defense Department official told *GSM*. "We need an effective stockpile [but] we haven't got a consensus within the administration on what that means. And so I can't say that, forever, this 'replacement' idea is verboten."

Insiders said the high-level discussion illustrated just the tip of the iceberg, reflecting a broader power struggle coalescing within the Obama administration's nuclear arms policy circles. The question: How to balance the president's ambitious vision for diminishing the global allure of nuclear weapons with domestic political pressure to maintain a robust U.S. arsenal?

To some extent, the evolving tug of war can be seen in Obama's own public words. On April 5, the president delivered a major address in Prague in which he laid out two facets of his nuclear weapons policy.

"The United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons," Obama said. "To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same."

He added, though: "Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies."

If Obama's drive to bring fresh thinking to complex policy issues prevails in this instance, these twin nuclear objectives might successfully be pursued hand-in-hand, according to some nuclear strategy experts. Nearly all agree it would take a great deal of focus and finesse.

As the world's premier nuclear power, "you need to act like you care just enough to maintain just enough [U.S. weapons] for long enough for people to think that you're serious," the senior Senate aide said last week. "This is hard to do."

However, behind closed doors in Obama's administration, senior appointees and others have begun lining up behind one or the other policy goal, and the two sides are beginning to clash.

The Prague speech "opened up two trenches," said Hans Kristensen, who directs the Federation of American Scientists' Nuclear Information Project.

One faction promotes "taking strong, practical and unambivalent steps toward zero" nuclear weapons, he said in an interview last week. The other is "more interested in maintaining a credible deterrent, as long as nuclear weapons exist."

Link to Arms Control

In Gates' view, as the stockpile ages, the risk grows that a defect might be discovered that could render a whole class of warheads unusable. Once arms control reductions are taken and the arsenal shrinks, the relative effect of such a discovery could magnify.

If a sizable portion of a smaller arsenal becomes unusable, the U.S. deterrent posture could be significantly weakened, according to this perspective.

The antidote, from Gates' standpoint, would be to ensure that -- after taking arms control reductions -- newer and more reliable warheads populate the remaining stockpile. The Reliable Replacement Warhead's new design was envisioned as replacing outdated materials with modern technologies, and lowering the risk of theft or accidental detonation.

The Pentagon leader -- a Bush administration holdover who has largely embraced the new president's policies on Iraq, Afghanistan and defense acquisition reform -- last year publicly laid down the gauntlet on nuclear modernization. He said an ambitious effort must be undertaken to assure that the arsenal remains safe, secure and reliable.

The RRW program, Gates told a Washington audience in October, "could potentially allow us to reduce aging stockpiles by balancing the risk between a smaller number of warheads and an industrial complex that could produce new weapons if the need arose."

Warhead replacement, the defense secretary said, "is about the future credibility of our strategic deterrent. And it deserves urgent attention."

"His view of the necessity of a safe, secure, and reliable nuclear arsenal has not changed since that speech," Geoff Morrell, Gates' spokesman, told *GSN* on Friday.

With the change in administration, the urgency Gates saw last fall was overtaken by more pressing issues, including the global economic meltdown and increasing violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, the June meeting offered Gates an opportunity to revisit the issue, this time specifically linking a domestic warhead-modernization imperative to the ongoing START follow-on negotiations, according to sources.

"Scheming and Maneuvering"

At the Pentagon, military officials are quietly looking to "fund RRW sometime late in the [fiscal 2011 budget-planning] process, either right after Thanksgiving or right after Christmas," said one former officer following the issue. "They don't understand that nuclear weapons are essentially political weapons and not to be used."

"RRW is dead but RRW supporters are looking to revive this corpse," said Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund. "They are scheming and maneuvering to use the Nuclear Posture Review as justification for a new warhead, to convince the White House that the only way to get the test-ban treaty ratified is to get a new warhead."

Morrell, Gates' spokesman, confirmed that the issue remains in play.

"The Nuclear Posture Review is still very much a work in progress," he said last week. "Nuclear modernization is certainly part of that review."

An influential, bipartisan group of senators last month wrote to Obama to suggest that their support for the upcoming START follow-on treaty might hinge on his nuclear warhead modernization plans.

When the president submits the new pact for Senate ratification, he "should also submit a plan," including multiyear budget figures, "to enhance the safety, security and reliability of the nuclear weapons stockpile," according to the July 23 letter, signed by six senators, including Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) and ranking member John McCain (R-Ariz.); and Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.) and ranking member Richard Lugar (R-Ind.).

"In whatever form it is, [RRW] is still alive," said one former official who asked not to be named. "I think the stalemate has disappeared and what emerges remains to be seen."

Obama administration officials "haven't reconciled Prague's rhetoric with the stockpile's reality," said the senior Senate aide. "I think right now they're muddling, and very badly."

A Possible Outcome?

In May, a bipartisan congressionally mandated commission recommended that the nation take a case-by-case approach to maintaining the U.S. arsenal. As each warhead type comes due for maintenance and life-extension measures, officials would determine what specific steps would be needed, in this view. Many experts believe the Pentagon-led Nuclear Posture Review will adopt a similar tack.

"The two basic approaches to refurbishment and modernization are, in fact, not stark alternatives," according to the report from the panel, headed by former defense secretaries William Perry and James Schlesinger.

"Rather, they are options along a spectrum. That spectrum is defined at its two ends by the pure remanufacturing of existing warheads with existing components at one end and complete redesign and new production of all system components at the other," the document states. "In between are various options to utilize existing components and design solutions while mixing in new components and solutions as needed. ... The decision on which approach is best should be made on a case-by-case basis as the existing stockpile of warheads ages."

Yet, some advocates of including the full array of modernization options have made clear they do not share Obama's vision of a nuclear weapons-free world. Those include Schlesinger, the commission's vice chairman, who said last month that "we will need a strong deterrent" into "perpetuity."

In June, a senior administration official endorsed the commission's approach to nuclear modernization.

"We can best manage risk if given the opportunity to apply a spectrum of options: warhead refurbishment, warhead component reuse and warhead replacement to our life extension strategy," Harvey, the former NNSA policy official, said at a Capitol Hill gathering.

Now a Pentagon senior civilian working on nuclear, chemical and biological defense programs, Harvey said a modernization effort that includes warhead-replacement would be consistent with the test-ban treaty, because upgraded weapons would increase confidence in the stockpile in the absence of test explosions.

He also said such an effort would bolster the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty because a "credible" U.S. deterrent would reduce incentives for allies to acquire their own atomic arms.

"If you're living in a world with other nuclear powers, are you going to play in the ballgame?" said a former senior Bush administration official, who asked not to be identified. "There's nothing in history to suggest that leading by example works in the nuclear world."

One replacement-warhead critic said this approach would almost certainly dash Obama's hopes of seeing the test-ban treaty ratified by other nations and come into force, and could also encourage further proliferation of nuclear weapons.

"One of the principle arguments in favor of the test ban has long been that it would prevent new types of weapons from coming on line," said Stephen Young, a senior analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "An American decision to deploy new, untested warheads undermines that argument and could destroy any chance of the treaty becoming reality."

Cirincione, who spent years as a congressional committee staff aide, finds particularly galling his sense that many in Obama's own appointed national security team are selling the president short by pushing for a replacement warhead. These include a half-dozen or more political appointees at lower levels at the Pentagon, State Department and elsewhere known more for their sense of caution than an affinity for bold strokes.

"Ironically, in their effort to look strong, they're displaying weakness," he said. "They're offering concessions up that should only come down to the last resort."

Several experts said Obama himself would likely have to issue a clear directive if his administration is to take a fresh approach to warhead modernization, one that reflects his vision of de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons on a path toward eliminating them.

"The president has to have the guts to say no," said one RRW opponent who asked not to be named. "Almost everyone else is inclined to Clinton-vintage political triangulation."

As a Democratic contender for the presidency, the former president's wife in 2007 staked out a position in opposition to a replacement warhead.

"The Bush administration has dangerously put the cart before the horse, planning to rush ahead with new nuclear weapons without any considered assessment of what we need these weapons for or what the impact of building them would be on our effort to stop the spread of nuclear weapons around the world," said Hillary Clinton, then representing New York in the Senate.

For his part, candidate Obama left himself some room to reverse course, saying he would not support "a premature decision to produce the RRW."

Without clear direction from Obama, now president, "we essentially signal [to the world] that the president's nuclear elimination pledge is just another ultimate goal and not different from what any other president has uttered," Kristensen said.

"The vision comes only from the president," he added. "Somebody has to make a decision and tell [the bureaucracy], 'Do it.'"

http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20090818_1478.php

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Missile Defense Agency (MDA)

News Release - 09-NEWS-0017

19 August 2009

Airborne Laser Successfully Fires the High Energy Laser in Flight

The Airborne Laser's (ABL) megawatt-class Chemical Oxygen Iodine Laser (COIL) successfully fired in flight Aug. 18. The test, "First Light in Flight," validates the High Energy Laser's (HEL) ability to fire in an airborne environment.

For the test, the modified Boeing 747-400F prototype aircraft took off from Edwards Air Force Base, Calif. and the megawatt-class laser was fired into an onboard calorimeter. The onboard calorimeter is a test instrument used to capture the laser energy and measure performance characteristics of the beam. This successful accomplishment is the final step in this phase of flight tests. Although significant work remains before external lasing in flight can take place, this phase of COIL testing represents a major step toward the ABL's planned lethal demonstration against a boosting missile later this year.

ABL is being developed as a future element of the nation's ballistic missile defense system, and the first to use directed energy to destroy ballistic missiles in their "boost" phase.

<http://www.mda.mil>

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Reuters

August 20, 2009

Boeing Floats New Anti-Missile Idea for Europe

By Jim Wolf

HUNTSVILLE, Ala., Aug 20 (Reuters) - Boeing Co unveiled a surprise proposal to build a mobile interceptor missile in an effort to blunt Russian fears of possible U.S. fixed missile-defense sites in Europe.

The idea was floated on Wednesday as the Obama administration weighs Bush-era plans to put 10 ground-based interceptors, or GBIs, in underground silos in Poland, paired with a radar site in the Czech Republic, as a hedge against Iran's growing ballistic-missile clout. The review is to be wrapped up by the end of this year.

Boeing, which manages the hub of a layered U.S. anti-missile shield deployed in 2004, is eyeing a 47,500-pound interceptor that could be flown to NATO bases as needed on Boeing-built C-17 cargo planes, erected quickly on a 60-foot trailer stand and taken home when judged safe to do so.

"If a fixed site is going to be just too hard to get implemented politically or otherwise, we didn't want people to think that the only way you needed to use a GBI was in a fixed silo," Greg Hyslop, Boeing's vice president and general manager for missile defense, told Reuters at a U.S. Army-sponsored missile-defense conference in Huntsville, Alabama.

A scale model showed a two-stage interceptor designed to be globally deployable within 24 hours at designated launch sites that would provide coverage for the United States and Europe.

Boeing had just started briefing the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency on the proposal, Hyslop said. The project could be completed by 2015 at probably less cost than had been planned for the silo-based interceptors, he said.

The Government Accountability Office reported earlier this month that military construction costs for the interceptor and radar sites could top \$1 billion. U.S. intelligence officials say that by 2015 Iran will have a long-range missile capability. The Polish and Czech sites are scheduled to be ready by then.

Moscow strongly opposes the possible Polish and Czech installations as a threat to its security. After the election of Barack Obama as U.S. president in November, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev threatened to base medium-range Iskander missiles near the Polish border if the United States persisted.

Boeing is not the only U.S. contractor preparing for a possible abandonment of the Polish and Czech options. Raytheon Co, the world's biggest missile maker, said Tuesday it was developing a land-based version of its existing Standard Missile-3 (SM-3), a star of U.S. missile defense from the sea, that could be used to defend Europe, Israel and elsewhere.

A reconfigured SM-3 interceptor was successfully fired by the U.S. Navy's Aegis ballistic missile-defense system in February 2008 to destroy an errant U.S. spy satellite. Japan is co-financing and co-producing a new, more capable version. Lockheed Martin Corp, the Pentagon's No. 1 contractor by sales, builds the Aegis system.

A land-based SM-3 could play a role in European defense with or without GBIs in Poland, Michael Booen, a Raytheon vice president, told Reuters. They could be operational as soon as 2013 if funded adequately, he said. The Pentagon has requested \$50 million for its development in the fiscal year starting Oct. 1.

Army Lieutenant General Patrick O'Reilly, the head of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency, hailed the SM-3 option Wednesday and was asked about a mobile GBI.

"That would be a significant undertaking," he said of the GBI concept after a presentation to the conference. "But we are looking for opportunities and the SM-3 is one we focused in on because of its accomplishments."

General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the session earlier in the day the United States had made "a couple of bad assumptions" in missile defense.

He singled out an expectation, at the heart of the U.S. rush to deploy, that "the emergence of the intercontinental ballistic missile threat would come much faster than it did" from countries like Iran and North Korea.

"The reality is that it has not come as fast as we thought it would come," Cartwright said. He said the United States, under its current missile-defense plans, had the capability to take on 15 inbound intercontinental ballistic missiles simultaneously using the 30 GBI's being placed in silos at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base, California.

"That's a heck of a lot more than a rogue" nation could fire, he said.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSB327847>

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RIA Novosti
19 August 2009

Tupolev Aircraft Maker to Develop Russia's New Strategic Bomber

ZHUKOVSKY (Moscow Region), August 19 (RIA Novosti) - The Russian Defense Ministry and the Tupolev aircraft maker have signed a contract on the development of a new-generation strategic bomber, the company's general director said on Wednesday.

"We signed a contract this year on research and development of a future strategic bomber for the Russian strategic aviation. It will be a conceptually new plane based on the most advanced technologies," Igor Shevchuk said at the MAKS-2009 air show near Moscow.

Tu-95MC Bear and Tu-160 Blackjack bombers, Tu-22M3 Backfire long-range bombers and Il-78 Midas aerial tankers will form the backbone of the Russian strategic aviation in the next decade following extensive modernization.

However, by 2020 they will be obsolete, and the new strategic bomber will allow Russia to maintain the effectiveness of the air component of its nuclear triad in competition with similar foreign aircraft, the official said.

Russia's Air Force commander, Col. Gen. Alexander Zelin earlier said a fifth-generation strategic bomber could be used effectively in both conventional and nuclear conflicts.

"The new plane will use a wide selection of high-precision weapons, and will have a whole range of new combat capabilities, allowing it to apply new methods to carrying out deterrence tasks," he said.

http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20090819/155857912.html

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RIA Novosti
20 August 2009

Russian State Defense Order for 2010 Planned at \$35 bln

MOSCOW, August 20 (RIA Novosti) - Russia's military-industrial commission has submitted to the Finance Ministry a draft 2010 state defense order for 1.109 trillion rubles (\$35 bln), a deputy premier said on Thursday.

"The total sum in the 2010 draft is 1.109 trillion rubles, which exceeds the state defense order for this year," Sergei Ivanov said.

Defense orders in 2009 are expected to amount to 1 trillion rubles (\$31.6 bln), with 332 billion (\$10.7 bln) being spent on purchases and maintenance of military equipment.

Ivanov said the draft document stipulates a sharp increase in expenditures on housing for military personnel, up to 104 billion rubles (\$3.3 bln).

Russia will spend 470 billion rubles (\$15 bln) on arms, equipment and maintenance of its Armed Forces in 2010, Ivanov added.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin earlier identified the priorities for the financing of the Armed Forces as "Maintenance and development of the nuclear capability and missile and space defense forces, providing troops with modern offensive weapons, as well as command and control, communication and intelligence systems, and strengthening military infrastructure in key strategic sectors."

http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20090820/155866985.html

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Reuters

Aug 18, 2009

FACTBOX: A look at South Korea's Space Program

SEOUL (Reuters) - South Korea has been making final preparations for its first space launch on Wednesday, which it hopes will quickly propel it into the position of the region's newest space power.

Here is a look at South Korea's space program:

FIRST ROCKET

- * The rocket planned for launch is called the Korea Space Launch Vehicle-1, or Naro-1.
- * Two-stage rocket is 33 meters (108 ft) long, 2.9 meters in diameter, weighs 140 tonnes and can generate 170 tonnes of thrust. It was built at a cost of 502.5 billion won (\$400 million), according to the South's Yonhap news agency.
- * Russia's Khrunichev space production center built the main thrusters for the first stage and provided technical assistance.

SATELLITES

- * South Korea has produced several satellites and relied on help from countries such as Russia to launch them.
- * It plans to launch a 100 kg satellite on Naro-1 that will monitor Earth's radiant energy.
- * It reached a deal with Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries earlier this year to launch earth-imaging satellite.
- * It plans to be able to eventually build satellites and launch other countries' satellites on its rockets.

SPACE PROGRAMME PLANS

- * Aims to build a rocket completely on its own by 2018.
- * Build a probe that can orbit Moon by 2025.
- * Develop a training program with the air force for Korean space astronauts.
- * Work with the U.S. and Japanese space agencies for joint research at the International Space Station.
- * Enable South Korean astronauts to participate in advanced countries' manned space projects through long-term international cooperation

(Reporting by Jon Herskovitz and Christine Kim; Editing by Sanjeev Miglani)

<http://in.reuters.com/article/scienceNews/idINTRE57H0V320090818?sp=true>

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Yonhap News
August 19, 2009

S. Korea Stops Rocket Launch Due To Technical Glitch

NARO SPACE CENTER, South Korea, Aug. 19 (Yonhap) -- South Korea suspended Wednesday the launch of its first space rocket with just under eight minutes remaining in the countdown due to a technical glitch.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI), said mission controllers decided to suspend the launch of the Korea Space Launch Vehicle-1 (KSLV-1) and dump its fuel. The rocket was scheduled for a 5 p.m. launch.

"There was a problem in the automatic launch sequence that caused the launch to be called off," said KARI head Lee Joo-jin, without going into details.

He said that no launch will take place within the day and that a new date will be set after consultation with experts from Russia, which made the first stage rocket.

The delay is the seventh time that the project -- started in 2002 under a cooperative arrangement with Russia -- has been delayed.

The KSLV-1, also called the Naro-1, stands 33 meters tall with a diameter of 2.9 meters. Its main first stage liquid-fuel rocket made in Russia can generate 170 tons of thrust. The second stage rocket made indigenously can generate 8 tons of thrust and is designed to place the satellite into proper orbit.

<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/techscience/2009/08/19/74/060100000AEN20090819009800320F.HTML>

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New York Times
August 19, 2009

In North Korea, Clinton Helped Unveil a Mystery

By MARK LANDLER and MARK MAZZETTI

WASHINGTON — The visit was arranged under a veil of secrecy with the help of an unlikely broker: a high-level American intelligence officer who spent much of his career trying to unlock the mysteries of North Korea.

When former President Bill Clinton landed in Pyongyang on Aug. 4 to win the release of two imprisoned American journalists, senior officials said he met an unexpectedly spry North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, who welcomed him with a long dinner that night, even proposing to stay up afterward.

Mr. Kim was flanked by two longtime aides, and he gave no hint that North Korea was in the throes of a succession struggle, despite the widespread questions over how long he might live.

Mr. Clinton and the Obama administration were determined not to extend a public-relations coup to Mr. Kim, who expressed a desire for better relations with the United States. But the visit is already setting off ripples that could change the tenor of the relationship between the United States and North Korea.

On Wednesday, diplomats from North Korea plan to visit Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico with an undisclosed agenda, a senior administration official said Tuesday. Like Mr. Clinton, Mr. Richardson has traveled to Pyongyang to negotiate the release of Americans held there, in his case in the mid-1990s.

The White House approved the visit, which the official said did not signal any movement toward the resumption of official talks with North Korea and the United States. But the meeting, which he said the North Koreans requested, comes on the heels of conciliatory gestures toward South Korea, and suggests a concerted effort on the part of the North.

Mr. Clinton steered clear of broader issues during his humanitarian mission, officials said. Indeed, he did not even ask to see Mr. Kim, requesting instead a meeting with "an appropriate official." To help the former president in case something went awry, the White House recommended John Podesta, an adviser to both Mr. Clinton and President Obama, join his delegation.

And to ensure he would not leave empty-handed, Mr. Clinton asked that a member of his entourage meet with the journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, shortly after he landed to make sure they were safe, said a senior administration official, who had been briefed on the visit.

For all the billions of dollars a year that the United States spends on intelligence gathering about mysterious and unpredictable countries like North Korea, it took just 20 hours on the ground in Pyongyang by a former president to give the Obama administration its first detailed look into a nuclear-armed nation that looms as one of its greatest foreign threats.

The details about Mr. Clinton's visit came from interviews with multiple government officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

On Tuesday, Mr. Clinton went to the White House to brief Mr. Obama and his top aides about the trip. Even before the 40-minute session in the Situation Room, Mr. Clinton had spoken to the president by phone and briefed his national security adviser, Gen. James L. Jones.

But the meeting was rich in symbolism, and the president invited Mr. Clinton to the Oval Office to talk further. The White House said little about what the men discussed, beyond noting that Mr. Obama had wanted to thank Mr. Clinton for winning the release of Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee.

The role of the intelligence officer, Joseph R. DeTrani, in arranging the visit, has not previously been reported. Mr. DeTrani is the government's senior officer responsible for collecting and analyzing intelligence on North Korea. His efforts to pave the way for Mr. Clinton's visit offer a glimpse into how the administration has been forced to use unorthodox methods to overcome the lack of formal communications.

During the Bush administration, when the United States was in still in talks with North Korea, the White House did not use intelligence officers for these purposes, an official familiar with the talks said. Indeed, before taking the job of North Korea mission manager in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in 2006, Mr. DeTrani served as the special envoy to the six-party talks with North Korea.

More than anything else, senior officials said, Mr. Clinton's visit served to clear up some of the shadows surrounding Kim Jong-il's health. After suffering a stroke last year, he looked frail in photos, spurring questions about who might replace him.

Those questions have not gone away, officials said, but they may recede a bit after Mr. Clinton's visit. So, too, may the speculation about internal battles, given the apparent good standing of Kim Kye-gwan, the chief nuclear negotiator, and another foreign policy official, Kang Sok-ju, who also took part in the meetings.

The former president did not engage in a substantive discussion about North Korea's nuclear program. Nor did the North Korean leader give Mr. Clinton any indication that his nation would relinquish its nuclear ambitions — a condition the United States has set for resuming negotiations, officials said.

During his one-hour meeting, officials said, Mr. Clinton advised the North Korean that he could win favor with South Korea and Japan by resolving cases of their citizens who had been abducted by North Korea. The dinner, which lasted over two hours, was "chitchat," the official said. "It was not substantive."

North Korea has sent other conciliatory signals. Kim Jong-il met last week with the head of a South Korean conglomerate and agreed to restart several tourism ventures, which allow people from the South to visit the North. North Korea said it would also allow reunions of Korean families divided by the border. Also, Yonhap, the South Korean news agency, said Wednesday the North would send a delegation to the funeral of Kim Dae-jung, a former president of the South.

It is not clear whether the overtures represent a change of heart or a growing desperation for money, as the North comes under increasingly strict United Nations sanctions. The White House says it is determined not to ease the pressure. In a deliberate bit of timing, it dispatched a senior diplomat, Philip S. Goldberg, to Asia on Tuesday to discuss ways to enforce the sanctions.

Still, officials and analysts said, Mr. Clinton's visit was valuable, largely because North Korea is so opaque. Victor Cha, a top North Korea adviser in the Bush administration, said, "The Clinton trip has got a lot of people rethinking and reassessing."

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/19/world/asia/19korea.html?_r=2&ref=world

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Yonhap News
19 August 2009

N. Korea Blasts S. Korea-U.S. Drill, Defends Nuke Ambitions

By Kim Hyun

SEOUL, Aug. 19 (Yonhap) -- North Korea defended its nuclear program on Wednesday, renewing its criticism of an ongoing South Korean-U.S. military exercise as a preparation for an atomic war.

Pyongyang routinely denounces such joint drills staged south of the border, while the allies say they are purely defensive. This year's Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise began Monday and continues until Aug. 27, mobilizing 56,000 South Korean troops and 10,000 American troops stationed here and abroad.

"Lurking behind them is a dangerous scheme for aggression to mount a preemptive nuclear attack on the DPRK (North Korea)," the North's foreign ministry spokesman was quoted as saying by the official Korean Central News Agency.

"The U.S. is so foolish as to try to stifle the ideology and system of the DPRK by force of arms," the unidentified spokesman said.

The North Korean military said Monday it has put its 1.2 million troops on a "special alert" in response. Seoul officials described the level of North Korea's response as "ordinary."

North Korea withdrew from six-party denuclearization talks in April and conducted its second nuclear test the following month.

The joint drill proves that North Korea's decision "to take one step after another for bolstering up its self-defensive deterrent was a right option in every aspect," the spokesman said.

"The DPRK will closely follow every movement of the U.S. and the South Korean authorities and adopt a tough measure against any provocation," he said.

In a rare conciliatory gesture, North Korea this week agreed to resume reunions of families separated by the Korean War and suspended cross-border tour programs. Seoul officials said they plan to propose inter-Korean Red Cross talks to follow up on the accord, reached by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and Hyun Jeong-eun, chairwoman of South Korea's Hyundai Group.

<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2009/08/19/20/0401000000AEN20090819004000315F.HTML>

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Wall Street Journal
August 20, 2009

North Koreans Ask for Direct U.S. Talks

By JAY SOLOMON

A delegation of North Korean diplomats told New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson that Pyongyang was prepared for expansive disarmament talks with the Obama administration, but wants to talk directly instead of in the multicountry format Washington prefers.

The comments made to Gov. Richardson Wednesday in New Mexico are the clearest signal yet from North Korean leader Kim Jong Il that his reclusive state is prepared to resume negotiations over its nuclear program following Pyongyang's May detonation of an atomic device and a string of missile launches that have rattled Northeast Asia. Gov. Richardson met two North Korean diplomats Wednesday at his office in Santa Fe.

The exchange came nearly two weeks after former President Bill Clinton visited Pyongyang and secured the release of two detained American journalists.

"The delegation indicated that North Korea is ready for a new dialogue with the United States regarding the nuclear issue," Mr. Richardson said.

Pyongyang's emerging position could place President Barack Obama in a difficult position diplomatically. The White House has stressed that it won't cut any new deals offering economic or diplomatic incentives to Pyongyang until it lives up to previous disarmament pledges it has made.

U.S. officials have stressed their intention to keep all talks with North Korea inside the six-party negotiating format that includes Russia, China, South Korea and Japan.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said the U.S. wasn't backing away from its commitment, despite Gov. Richardson's meeting. "We have been clear that North Korea should come back to the six-party process as it's the clearest way for us to coordinate with our allies," he said. "Within this process, there's significant room for bilateral talks."

Critics of the White House have charged Mr. Obama risks rewarding North Korea's provocative actions by allowing such high-profile meetings between Democratic stalwarts and Pyongyang. Mr. Clinton's trip received particular attacks, as Kim Jong Il seemed to use the former U.S. leader's presence to enhance North Korea on the diplomatic stage.

Gov. Richardson Wednesday acknowledged Pyongyang was pursuing this tactic. "The North Koreans obviously used the journalists as a bargaining chip and now they want a gesture in return," the governor told CNN.

Gov. Richardson, a Democrat, has long played the role of diplomatic troubleshooter with the North, having traveled to Pyongyang to negotiate the release of American servicemen. The White House and State Department stressed that he was hosting the North Koreans in his capacity as a private citizen. But the State Department provided legal approval for the two North Korean diplomats to travel to New Mexico, according to U.S. officials.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said there was "strong hope" that the meetings could lead to a resumption of international negotiations to end North Korea's nuclear program.

North Korean diplomats are barred from traveling outside Manhattan, home to United Nations headquarters, due to the absence of U.S.-North Korean diplomatic relations.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125070593088843733.html>

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United Press International (UPI)

19 August 2009

Peres says Nuclear Iran is a Death Camp

MOSCOW, Aug. 19 (UPI) -- Nuclear weapons in Iranian hands have only one meaning: a flying death camp, Israeli President Shimon Peres told Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

Peres, on a two day visit to Russia, discussed an array of issues with his Russian counterpart during a four hour meeting at Medvedev's summer residence on the shores of the Black Sea, Peres' office said in a statement released Tuesday evening.

The two discussed strengthening strategic relations, Russia's involvement in promoting regional peace and the Iranian nuclear issue, the statement said.

"The fact that Iran is investing billions of dollars in the development of long-range missiles, in parallel to its nuclear project, is clear indication of its intent. Iran constantly threatens not only Israel, but also the entire world," Peres was quoted as saying.

Medvedev told Peres his country is opposed to nuclear weapons in Iranian hands and expressed concern, the statement said. The Russian president also said he would review his country's policy concerning weapons sales to regimes hostile to Israel.

He asked Peres to outline Israel's policy regarding the Arab peace initiative and direct negotiations with Syria, the statement said. Medvedev said he believes Syrian President Bashar Assad is prepared to engage in direct peace negotiations with Israel and said Russia is willing to actively assist in the matter, the statement said.

http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/08/19/Peres-says-nuclear-Iran-is-a-death-camp/UPI-55611250679305/

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Agence France-Presse (AFP)
News Hosted by Google
19 August 2009

Israel says UN Covering up Iran's Nuclear Arms Drive

JERUSALEM — Israel is accusing the UN nuclear weapons watchdog of holding back incriminating evidence of Iran's drive to obtain nuclear weapons, the Haaretz newspaper reported on Wednesday.

It cited unnamed Israeli officials as saying the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was refraining from publishing data obtained in recent months that indicates Iran is pursuing information about weaponisation efforts and a military nuclear programme.

IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei, who is to vacate his post in December, has said the UN watchdog does not have any evidence suggesting Iran is developing a nuclear weapons programme.

But Haaretz cited officials as saying the new evidence was presented to the IAEA in a classified annex written by its inspectors and said to have been signed by the head of the inspection team in Iran.

The document was not included in the final report, it said.

British, French, German and US senior officials have recently pressured ElBaradei to publish the information, the newspaper said.

Israel has often criticised ElBaradei in the past, accusing him of being lax towards Iran, and asked in 2007 that he be fired.

A government spokesman declined to comment on the report.

Widely considered to be the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear armed power, Israel, along with Washington suspects Iran of trying to develop atomic weapons under the guise of a civilian nuclear programme, a charge Tehran denies.

Israel considers the Islamic republic to be its main foe due to repeated statements by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calling for the Jewish state to be "wiped off the map."

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5je6b4bWJsbttyCytSoPk8malmvFA>

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New York Times
August 20, 2009

Israel Says Russia May Reconsider Plans to Sell Missiles to Iran

By ELLEN BARRY

MOSCOW — The Israeli president, Shimon Peres, said Wednesday that his Russian counterpart, Dmitri A. Medvedev, had promised to reconsider Russia's plans to provide advanced surface-to-air missiles to Iran, a deal that Washington has also sought to halt.

The missiles would offer Iran considerable confidence that it could prevent airstrikes on its nuclear sites.

But a Russian official close to the talks, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of their delicacy, said the contract between Russia and Iran was not discussed. Mr. Peres did raise the issue of the missiles, known as S-300s, the official said, but Mr. Peres emphasized that Israel did not plan any military strikes on Iranian territory.

“Accordingly, there was no discussion on the presidential level of any contractual obligations of Russian organizations regarding the provision of military equipment to Iran,” the official said.

Russia signed a contract with Iran to deliver S-300 missiles, which have a much longer range and higher accuracy than Iran's present air defense systems. But amid the objections of Israel and the United States, Moscow has never delivered the missiles.

Mr. Peres spoke about the missiles at a morning news conference in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi, after talks with Mr. Medvedev there on Tuesday. He said Mr. Medvedev “gave a promise he will reconsider the sales of the S-

300 because this affects the delicate balance which exists already in the Middle East, and will enforce, in my judgment, the aggressive intentions of Iran.”

Israel and many Western nations suspect that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon, while Iran says its nuclear program is solely for generating electricity. Israel has repeatedly raised the possibility of airstrikes to halt Iran’s nuclear progress.

Blocking the missile deal has been one of the United States’ goals in its pursuit of improved relations with Moscow.

At the news conference, Mr. Peres suggested that Russian concessions on the missile contract could affect American plans for missile defense in Eastern Europe, which Russia objects to.

“If it wouldn’t be for the Iranian missiles, maybe one of the thorny issues between Russia and the United States would disappear, namely the antimissile bases that the United States is building in Poland” and the Czech Republic, Mr. Peres said.

When asked about the missile contract in March, at a news conference in Geneva with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, said that Russia would seriously consider American and Israeli concerns.

He said Russia supplied only “nondestabilizing defensive types of weapons” and, alluding to the United States’ military assistance to Georgia, added that “we want our partners to behave with equal restraint in their military supplies to the countries who quite recently used those weapons close to our borders.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/20/world/europe/20russia.html>

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Boston Globe
August 21, 2009

Iran Lifts Ban on Nuclear Inspectors

By George Jan, Associated Press

VIENNA - Iran has lifted a yearlong ban and allowed UN inspectors to visit a nearly completed nuclear reactor and has granted greater monitoring rights at another atomic site, diplomats said yesterday.

International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors visited the nearly finished Arak heavy water reactor last week, the diplomats said. They added that Iran agreed last week to agency requests to expand monitoring of the Natanz uranium enrichment site, which produces nuclear fuel that can be further enriched into warhead material.

The diplomats demanded anonymity because their information was confidential.

Iran is softening its position days before the release of a new report on its facilities from the international watchdog group. It is unclear whether the increased access is an attempt to influence how much unsubstantiated information would be released in the report.

The inspectors had sought additional cameras and inspections of the Natanz site, to track the rapidly expanding enrichment program. Iran’s stonewalling had raised agency concerns that its inspectors might not be able to ensure that material produced at Natanz is not diverted for potential weapons use.

Since its clandestine enrichment efforts were revealed more than six years ago, Iran has steadily increased them, shrugging off three sets of UN sanctions and rejecting talks meant to induce it to mothball the activity.

A June report from the inspectors said nearly 5,000 centrifuges were enriching at Natanz - about 1,000 more than at the time of the last agency report, issued in February - with more than 2,000 others ready to start enriching.

The agency’s next report is due within two weeks. It is expected to confirm that operations continue to expand - along with Tehran’s potential capacity to produce weapons-grade uranium.

The United States, Britain, France, and Germany, which are considering new sanctions, are urging the nuclear watchdog to reveal all the information it has that suggests Tehran is pursuing atomic weapons, diplomats said.

The nations are planning to hold talks on Iran’s nuclear program next month with Russia and China, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Western diplomats say. To make a strong case for more sanctions, diplomats said, the

four Western powers have been urging Mohamed El Baradei, the outgoing head of the UN nuclear watchdog, to reveal information he has on Iran that they say could help bring Russia and China around.

Western diplomats said they hoped El Baradei would include unreleased information the agency has gathered on Iran.

One senior Western diplomat said that some of that information related to Iran's so-called "alleged studies" into building a nuclear weapon.

"The alleged studies are more than alleged," the diplomat said on condition of anonymity, adding that El Baradei has for years been "overly cautious" about his Iran reports.

http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2009/08/21/iran_lifts_ban_on_un_inspections/

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New York Times

August 21, 2009

Lockerbie Convict Returns to Jubilant Welcome

By ALAN COWELL and A. G. SULZBERGER

Over ferocious American objections, Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, the only person convicted in the 1988 Lockerbie jet bombing, flew home to a jubilant welcome in Libya on Thursday night after the Scottish government ordered his release on compassionate grounds.

Mr. Megrahi, 57, a former Libyan intelligence agent, had served 8 years of a 27-year minimum sentence on charges of murdering 270 people in Britain's worst terrorist episode.

Widely forecast in British news reports over the past week, his release angered many Americans whose relatives died in the bombing, leaving them to confront anew the agony and anguish of loss and to question the notion of justice that allowed a man convicted of murderous acts, which he always denied, to walk free.

"Compassionate release on the face of it is insane for a convicted mass murderer," said Susan Cohen, of Cape May Court House, N.J., whose 20-year-old daughter, Theodora, died when a bomb smuggled onto Pan Am Flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, on Dec. 21, 1988. "For the families we have this thing that is so horrible to live with anyway, and now we have to live with this."

A "tiny slice of justice," she said, had been lost.

Ignoring American demands that Mr. Megrahi not be celebrated as a hero returning to his homeland, hundreds of young Libyans were bused to the military airport in Tripoli to welcome him home, cheering and waving Libyan and Scottish flags as he sped off in a convoy of white vehicles.

On the flight from Scotland, Mr. Megrahi was accompanied by Saif al-Islam el-Qaddafi, son of the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, stamping an official imprimatur on his release and reinforcing the official Libyan view that Mr. Megrahi was a scapegoat used by the West to reinforce its depiction of Libya as a pariah state.

The welcome was another slight for Washington, which had sought strenuously to persuade Libya not to permit a hero's welcome for Mr. Megrahi and had opposed his release.

Still protesting his innocence and offering "sincere sympathy" to the families of those who died in the bombing, Mr. Megrahi was granted his freedom under the terms of Scottish laws permitting the early release of prisoners with less than three months to live. The Scottish authorities and his lawyers say he has terminal prostate cancer.

President Obama, echoing widespread anger and disappointment in the United States over the decision, called Mr. Megrahi's release "a mistake" and said the government was holding further discussions on the matter.

"We're now in contact with the Libyan government and want to make sure that if, in fact, this transfer has taken place, that he's not welcomed back in some way, but instead should be under house arrest," Mr. Obama said in a radio interview.

After his release from Greenock prison in Scotland, Mr. Megrahi traveled in a white van flanked by police cars to Glasgow Airport, where a special V.I.P.-configured Airbus plane from Libya's Afriqiyah airline awaited him.

Hunched but unassisted, he climbed the airplane steps wearing a white tracksuit and carrying a cane. By the time he arrived in Tripoli, Mr. Megrahi had changed into a dark business suit.

His expression as he left Scotland was obscured by a white baseball cap pulled low over his forehead and a white scarf, which he held across the lower part of his bespectacled face. It was the first the world had seen of him in years, and some Americans took the vision of him walking free as a confirmation of their nightmares.

“He’s getting away with it; that’s exactly what I thought,” said Rosemary Wolfe of North Myrtle Beach, S.C., whose stepdaughter Miriam was killed in the bombing and who watched Mr. Megrahi’s departure on television Thursday.

“It was a helpless, hopeless feeling. He’s going back to his family, but Miriam will never be able to come back to us,” she said.

In a statement issued by his lawyers after he left prison, Mr. Megrahi insisted one more time on his innocence. “And I say in the clearest possible terms, which I hope every person in every land will hear: all of this I have had to endure for something that I did not do,” he said.

“To those victims’ relatives who can bear to hear me say this: they continue to have my sincere sympathy for the unimaginable loss that they have suffered,” the statement said.

At a news conference earlier, Scotland’s justice minister, Kenny MacAskill, announced that Mr. Megrahi, “convicted in 2001 for the Lockerbie bombing, now terminally ill with prostate cancer, be released on compassionate grounds and allowed to return to Libya to die.”

With his release, Mr. MacAskill said, Mr. Megrahi “now faces a sentence imposed by a higher power.”

“It is one that no court, in any jurisdiction, in any land, could revoke or overrule,” he said. “It is terminal, final and irrevocable. He is going to die.”

But even that conclusion, to many Americans, remains a matter for debate. While Mr. MacAskill said medical evidence supported it, Denise Rein, whose husband, Mark, the treasurer of Salomon Brothers, died in the bombing, said that she wanted the medical records released and independently verified.

In any event, the notion of compassion sat uneasily with many American families. Donald Malicote, whose son, an Army specialist, and daughter-in-law were killed in the bombing, learned about the release while watching television at his home in Lebanon, Ohio. “He didn’t show our kids any mercy, so I have a hard time feeling compassion for him,” Mr. Malicote said. “He killed a lot of young kids. I just can’t forgive a man for that.”

The bombing killed 259 people on the Pan Am jet and 11 on the ground. Of the dead, 189 were Americans.

Jeannine Boulanger of Shrewsbury, Mass., whose 21-year-old daughter, Nicole, died, said Mr. Megrahi’s eight years in prison amounted to about a dozen days for each victim. “Is that justice?” she asked.

“It’s not about compassion,” she said. “It’s about what’s in the best interest of the countries.”

Senator John Kerry, the Massachusetts Democrat who is the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and one of seven senators to protest Mr. Megrahi’s early release, said in a statement that “the news today from Glasgow turned the word ‘compassion’ on its head.”

Many British families have said they accept Mr. Megrahi’s protestations of innocence and support his release. But Mr. Megrahi’s return to Libya stirred controversy in Britain, some of it directed at the Labour government, which critics accused of encouraging Libya to press for Mr. Megrahi’s release as part of a broader reconciliation in recent years that has included lucrative oil contracts from the Qaddafi government for BP, one of Britain’s largest companies.

David Cameron, leader of the opposition Conservatives, condemned the decision to set Mr. Megrahi free. “I think it’s wrong, and it’s the product of some completely nonsensical thinking,” he said. “This man was convicted of murdering 270 people and he showed no compassion to them, and they weren’t allowed to go home to die with their relatives in their own beds.”

John F. Burns contributed reporting from London.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/21/world/europe/21lockerbie.html?_r=1&ref=world

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Times of London
August 21, 2009

Militants Behind Indonesia Hotel Bombs Plotted to Shoot Barack Obama

FOREIGN STAFF

Militants behind the hotel bombings in Jakarta also planned to use snipers to attack Barack Obama's convoy, according to an intelligence expert.

A link between the suicide bombings at the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels on July 17, which killed nine people and wounded 53, and funding from a group linked to al-Qaeda is also being investigated, Dynno Chressbon, from the Centre for Intelligence and National Security, said.

He said that two of the four wanted suspects, Ario Sudarso and Mohamad Syahrir, had been trained for an attack on Mr Obama, who is expected to visit Indonesia before the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Singapore in November.

"For Obama, they planned to attack the convoy around the airport using MK-IIIIs," he said, referring to a Russian-made sniper rifle that he said was used by the Taleban in Afghanistan and in Muslim conflict areas in the Philippines.

An Indonesian police spokesman could not be reached for comment yesterday, but the sniper plot and a thwarted plot to attack Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the Indonesian President, indicate the scale of the ambitions of Indonesian militants may be higher than first thought.

The alleged snipers were from a group called the Indonesian Islamic State, which has a training camp in the restive southern Philippines and received support from a group headed by the Malaysian-born militant Noordin Mohammad Top, Mr Chressbon said.

Mr Top is believed to be the mastermind behind the hotel attacks, which killed nine people and wounded 53.

Police have arrested at least five people believed to be connected to the bombings and three others have been killed during raids.

A possible al-Qaeda connection to the hotel attacks was being investigated, after two men believed to be from Yemen had stayed at the Marriott at the same time as an Indonesian called Syaifudin Zuhri bin Djaelani Irsyad, who is believed to have recruited the suicide bombers.

The men claimed to be airline crew when they stayed in the Marriott, but police suspect that they were involved in the plot.

"They booked and said they were Yemen Airways staff," Mr Chressbon said, adding that the airline said its staff did not use the Marriott for stopovers.

Ansyaad Mbai, head of the anti-terrorism desk at Indonesia's Security Ministry, said that police were trying to confirm a link between the men and the attacks.

"Of course, they have suspicions into this but it cannot be confirmed yet so it's impossible for them to say," he said.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6804565.ece>

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New York Times
August 19, 2009

F.B.I. Agents' Role Is Transformed by Terror Fight

By ERIC SCHMITT

NORWALK, Calif. — The report last month was chilling: a 55-gallon drum of radioactive material had gone missing during shipment from North Carolina to California. Even worse, the person who signed for the cargo was not an employee of the company that ordered the load.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation here ramped up, consulting health officials, questioning radiation specialists and tracking down the trucker who dropped off the material, which could be used in a radioactive-bomb attack. Three hours later, the shipper found the drum — still sitting on a loading dock 20 miles from its destination in the Los Angeles area — having confused it with a similar shipment sent to a different company on the same day.

For an F.B.I. team here that vets tips and threats about possible terrorist activity, it was yet another false alarm in a job largely defined by hoaxes and bogus leads that must still be run to ground.

“A lot of time we are chasing shadows,” said Lee Ann Bernardino, a 20-year F.B.I. special agent who handled the case, “but it’s better to do that than find out later you let something get by.”

Spending two days with Agent Bernardino’s 21-member threat squad, known as Counterterrorism 6, or CT-6, offered a rare window on the daily workings of an F.B.I. transformed after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The bureau now ranks fighting terrorism as its No. 1 priority. It has doubled the number of agents assigned to counterterrorism duties to roughly 5,000 people, and has created new squads across the country that focus more on deterring and disrupting terrorism than on solving crimes.

But the manpower costs of this focus are steep, and the benefits not always clear. Of the 5,500 leads that the squad has pursued since it was formed five years ago, only 5 percent have been found credible enough to be sent to permanent F.B.I. squads for longer-term investigations, said Supervisory Special Agent Kristen von KleinSmid, head of the squad. Only a handful of those cases have resulted in criminal prosecutions or other law enforcement action, and none have foiled a specific terrorist plot, the authorities acknowledge.

As part of the larger debate about the transformation of the F.B.I., some counterterrorism specialists question the value of threat squads — which are also in Washington, New York and a few other cities.

“Just chasing leads burns through resources,” said Amy Zegart, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who writes extensively on intelligence matters. “You’re really going to get bang for the buck when you chase leads based on a deeper assessment of who threatens us, their capabilities and indicators of impending attack. Right now, there’s more chasing than assessing.”

The F.B.I. director, Robert S. Mueller III, has acknowledged the toll of the shift of agents to counterterrorism and intelligence duties. It comes at the cost of resources to combat corporate and financial fraud, and the deadly drug war in Mexico. About 40 percent of the bureau’s agents are devoted to fighting terrorism.

The threat squad here is just one part of the F.B.I.’s sprawling Los Angeles field office. About 30 percent of the office’s 750 agents work on terrorism cases, including Al Qaeda, Hamas, terrorism financing and animal rights extremists.

Federal agents say a major lesson of the Sept. 11 attacks is that all credible reports of possible terrorist activity must be checked. And they say it is more efficient for one squad with specially trained investigators to assess these tips, allowing other agents to stay focused on longer-term terrorist inquiries.

The squad’s work here has yielded important results, officials say. In March 2008, Seyed Maghloubi, an Iranian-born American citizen, was sentenced to 41 months in prison for plotting to illegally export 100,000 Uzi submachine guns to Iran, via Dubai.

His arrest stemmed from a tip from a police informant whom Mr. Maghloubi contacted about buying the weapons. The threat squad picked up the tip and developed information that led to a federal sting operation against Mr. Maghloubi.

Responsible for overseeing seven counties and 19 million people in Southern California, the threat squad was created in May 2004 after threats to shopping malls on the West Side of Los Angeles diverted about 100 agents from other counterterrorism inquiries.

Working out of a drab office building here 15 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, the investigators sift through tips and threats called in by the public or passed on by a regional intelligence center. The agents check databases and conduct field interviews before deciding whether to act on a case immediately, farm it out to another F.B.I. squad or refer it to another law enforcement agency.

“Someone has to go out and knock on the doors,” said Frank Leal, a 29-year detective with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department assigned to the threat squad along with investigators from 10 other local, state and federal agencies. “You don’t want any one of those leads to go boom.”

The squad now gets about 80 leads a month, down from a peak of about 140 a month a few years ago, a decline Agent von KleinSmid attributed in part to greater screening of tips by other intelligence analysts.

Recent reported threats range from the mundane to the bizarre.

On Aug. 1, a man called in a bomb threat to a Marriott-chain hotel in Hollywood. The authorities found nothing in a sweep of the hotel. A few hours later, the same man called to ask if the hotel had by any chance lowered its rates recently, and if it would do so if a bomb threat came in.

Security guards have questioned people taking pictures of oil refineries in the Los Angeles area. Many turned out to be college students fulfilling assignment for class projects.

Another recent reported threat sounded like a Hollywood thriller. In June, a college student told her University of California, Riverside, professor that her father, a Pakistani microbiologist, was secretly testing botulism toxins on animals in their basement on the outskirts of Los Angeles. F.B.I. agents, backed by police and hazardous-material experts, moved in on the house only to find nothing. The student had been trying to impress her professor in a weird way, investigators said.

Nicholas M. Legaspi, the lead F.B.I. special agent on the bogus biolaboratory case, said he had no regrets about the effort devoted to the false alarm, which he said had served as an excellent training exercise.

Agent Legaspi said his initial frustration about working on the threat squad was tempered by overseas assignments in which he investigated the attacks in Mumbai, India; worked alongside American Special Forces in Afghanistan; and interrogated Qaeda detainees at the American prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

“For the first several years, it was very disappointing always chasing ghosts,” said Agent Legaspi, a former officer in the Army and the California Highway Patrol. “But looking at what goes on overseas keeps me sharp. I realized the terrorists are deadly serious. It makes me hungry to do this job.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/19/us/19terror.html?adxnml=1&ref=us&adxnmlx=1250787600-QoP5lhhyEQMmgLVAVHLjVg>

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Washington Post
August 20, 2009

CIA Hired Firm for Assassin Program

By Joby Warrick and R. Jeffrey Smith
Washington Post Staff Writers

A secret CIA program to kill top al-Qaeda leaders with assassination teams was outsourced in 2004 to Blackwater USA, the private security contractor whose operations in Iraq prompted intense scrutiny, according to two former intelligence officials familiar with the events.

The North Carolina-based company was given operational responsibility for targeting terrorist commanders and was awarded millions of dollars for training and weaponry, but the program was canceled before any missions were conducted, the two officials said.

The assassination program -- revealed to Congress in June by CIA Director Leon Panetta -- was initially launched in 2001 as a CIA-led effort to kill or capture top al-Qaeda members using the agency's paramilitary forces. But in 2004, after briefly terminating the program, agency officials decided to revive it under a different code name, using outside contractors, the officials said.

"Outsourcing gave the agency more protection in case something went wrong," said a retired intelligence officer intimately familiar with the assassination program.

The contract was awarded to Blackwater, now known as Xe Services LLC, in part because of its close ties to the CIA and because of its record in carrying out covert assignments overseas, the officials said. The security contractor's senior management has included high-ranking former CIA officials -- among them J. Cofer Black, the agency's former top counterterrorism official, who joined the company in early 2005, three months after retiring from government service.

Blackwater became notorious for a string of incidents in Iraq during which its heavily armed guards were accused of using excessive force. In the deadliest incident, 17 civilians were killed in a Baghdad square by Blackwater guards in September 2007 after the guards' convoy reportedly came under fire.

The plan to kill top al-Qaeda leaders was thrust into the spotlight in July, shortly after Panetta briefed members of two congressional panels about the program. Panetta told House and Senate leaders that he had only recently learned of the program and, upon doing so, had canceled it. Panetta also told lawmakers that he thought they had been inappropriately kept in the dark about the plan -- in part because then-Vice President Richard B. Cheney had directed the CIA not to reveal the program to Congress.

The CIA declined to comment Wednesday about Blackwater's alleged involvement in the program, which was first reported Wednesday night on the Web site of the New York Times. Efforts to reach Blackwater for comment late Wednesday were unsuccessful.

Agency officials again defended Panetta's decision to terminate the effort and notify congressional overseers.

"Director Panetta thought this effort should be briefed to Congress, and he did so," CIA spokesman George Little said. "He also knew it hadn't been successful, so he ended it. Neither decision was difficult. This was clear and straightforward."

The House Intelligence Committee has launched an investigation into whether the CIA broke the law by failing to notify Congress about the program for eight years. Current and former agency officials have disputed claims by some Democratic lawmakers that the withholding of key details of the program was illegal.

"Director Panetta did not tell the committees that the agency had misled the Congress or had broken the law," Little said. "He decided that the time had come to brief Congress on a counterterrorism effort that was, in fact, much more than a PowerPoint presentation."

The effort, known to intelligence officials as the "targeted killing" program, was originally conceived for use in Iraq and Afghanistan, but officials later sought to expand it to other countries in the region, according to a source familiar with its inception.

It was aimed at removing from the battlefield members of al-Qaeda and its affiliates who were judged to be plotting attacks against U.S. forces or interests. The program was initially managed by the CIA's counterterrorism center, but its functions were partly transferred to Blackwater when key officials from the center retired from the CIA and went to work for the private contractor.

Former agency officials have described the assassination program as more aspirational than operational. One former high-ranking intelligence official briefed on the details said there were three iterations of the program over eight years, each with a separate code name. Total spending was well under \$20 million over eight years, the official said.

"We never actually did anything," said the former official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the program remains highly classified. "It never became a covert action."

A second former official, also intimately familiar with details of the program, said the Blackwater phase involved "lots of time spent training," mostly near the CIA's covert facility near Williamsburg. The official said the teams simulated missions that often involved kidnapping.

"They were involved not only in trying to kill but also in getting close enough to snatch," he said. Among team members there was "much frustration" that the program never reached an operational stage, he said.

The CIA -- and Blackwater -- were not the only agents that sought to covertly kill key members of al-Qaeda using small, highly trained teams. A similar effort, officials say, was undertaken by U.S. Special Forces.

"The targets were generally people on a kill or capture list," said a source familiar with Special Forces operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. "How did people get on the list? Well, if we knew that people were involved in planning attacks, they got on the list. More than half were generally captured. But the decision was made in advance that if they resisted, or if it was necessary for any reason, just kill them."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/19/AR2009081904315.html>

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New York Times
August 21, 2009

C.I.A. Said To Use Outsiders To Put Bombs On Drones

By James Risen and Mark Mazzetti

WASHINGTON — From a secret division at its North Carolina headquarters, the company formerly known as Blackwater has assumed a role in Washington's most important counterterrorism program: the use of remotely piloted drones to kill Al Qaeda's leaders, according to government officials and current and former employees.

The division's operations are carried out at hidden bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the company's contractors assemble and load Hellfire missiles and 500-pound laser-guided bombs on remotely piloted Predator aircraft, work previously performed by employees of the Central Intelligence Agency. They also provide security at the covert bases, the officials said.

The role of the company in the Predator program highlights the degree to which the C.I.A. now depends on outside contractors to perform some of the agency's most important assignments. And it illustrates the resilience of Blackwater, now known as Xe (pronounced Zee) Services, though most people in and outside the company still refer to it as Blackwater. It has grown through government work, even as it attracted criticism and allegations of brutality in Iraq.

A spokesman for the C.I.A. declined to comment for this article.

The New York Times reported Thursday that the agency hired Blackwater in 2004 as part of a secret program to locate and assassinate top Qaeda operatives.

In interviews on Thursday, current and former government officials provided new details about Blackwater's association with the assassination program, which began in 2004 not long after Porter J. Goss took over at the C.I.A. The officials said that the spy agency did not dispatch the Blackwater executives with a "license to kill." Instead, it ordered the contractors to begin collecting information on the whereabouts of Al Qaeda's leaders, carry out surveillance and train for possible missions.

"The actual pulling of a trigger in some ways is the easiest part, and the part that requires the least expertise," said one government official familiar with the canceled C.I.A. program. "It's everything that leads up to it that's the meat of the issue."

Any operation to capture or kill militants would have had to have been approved by the C.I.A. director and presented to the White House before it was carried out, the officials said. The agency's current director, Leon E. Panetta, canceled the program and notified Congress of its existence in an emergency meeting in June.

The extent of Blackwater's business dealings with the C.I.A. has largely been hidden, but its public contract with the State Department to provide private security to American diplomats in Iraq has generated intense scrutiny and controversy.

The company lost the job in Iraq this year, after Blackwater guards were involved in shootings in 2007 that left 17 Iraqis dead. It still has other, less prominent State Department work.

Five former Blackwater guards have been indicted in federal court on charges related to the 2007 episode.

A spokeswoman for Xe did not respond to a request for comment.

For its intelligence work, the company's sprawling headquarters in North Carolina has a special division, known as Blackwater Select. The company's first major arrangement with the C.I.A. was signed in 2002, with a contract to provide security for the agency's new station in Kabul, Afghanistan. Blackwater employees assigned to the Predator bases receive training at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada to learn how to load Hellfire missiles and laser-guided smart bombs on the drones, according to current and former employees, who asked not to be identified for fear of upsetting the company.

The C.I.A. has for several years operated Predator drones out of a remote base in Shamsi, Pakistan, but has secretly added a second site at an air base in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, several current and former government and company officials said. The existence of the Predator base in Jalalabad has not previously been reported.

Officials said the C.I.A. now conducted most of its Predator missile and bomb strikes on targets in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region from the Jalalabad base, with drones landing or taking off almost hourly. The base in Pakistan is still in use. But officials said that the United States decided to open the Afghanistan operation in part

because of the possibility that the Pakistani government, facing growing anti-American sentiment at home, might force the C.I.A. to close the one in Pakistan.

Blackwater is not involved in selecting targets or actual strikes. The targets are selected by the C.I.A., and employees at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va., pull the trigger remotely. Only a handful of the agency's employees actually work at the Predator bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the current and former employees said.

They said that Blackwater's direct role in these operations had sometimes led to disputes with the C.I.A. Sometimes when a Predator misses a target, agency employees accuse Blackwater of poor bomb assembly, they said. In one instance last year recounted by the employees, a 500-pound bomb dropped off a Predator before it hit the target, leading to a frantic search for the unexploded bomb in the remote Afghan-Pakistani border region. It was eventually found about 100 yards from the original target.

The role of contractors in intelligence work expanded after the Sept. 11 attacks, as spy agencies were forced to fill gaps created when their work forces were reduced during the 1990s, after the end of the cold war.

More than a quarter of the intelligence community's current work force is made up of contractors, carrying out missions like intelligence collection and analysis and, until recently, interrogation of terrorist suspects.

"There are skills we don't have in government that we may have an immediate requirement for," Gen. Michael V. Hayden, who ran the C.I.A. from 2006 until early this year, said during a panel discussion on Thursday on the privatization of intelligence.

General Hayden, who succeeded Mr. Goss at the agency, acknowledged that the C.I.A. program continued under his watch, though it was not a priority. He said the program was never prominent during his time at the C.I.A., which was one reason he did not believe that he had to notify Congress. He said it did not involve outside contractors by the time he came in.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat who presides over the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the agency should have notified Congress in any event. "Every single intelligence operation and covert action must be briefed to the Congress," she said. "If they are not, that is a violation of the law."

Mark Landler contributed reporting.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/21/us/21intel.html>

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Al-Arabiya – Saudi Arabia

OPINION

20 August 2009

Iran, West and Nuclear Hypocrisy

By Jonathan Power

Let's exaggerate. Iran has been singled out for persecution over its alleged nuclear bomb making program because in 1979 its Revolutionary Guards took the staff of the U.S. Embassy hostage, causing outrage in America with even the esteemed Walter Cronkite ratcheting up the tension, putting up on the screen, as he read the nightly news, the number of days they had been incarcerated. The sitting U.S. President, Jimmy Carter (picture) was deposed, tarred with the brush of utter failure.

Something of an exaggeration that this was the sole or even the most important factor in building a pro-bomb lobby in Iran. Still it has a grain of truth: Iran has been singled out unfairly. The West and Russia are engaged in discriminating against it.

Brazil has had a nuclear enrichment program for decades (including a large ultracentrifuge enrichment plant, several laboratory-scale facilities, a reprocessing facility to make plutonium, and a missile program). In the 1980s it built two nuclear devices. Three years ago I asked the chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia if Washington was worried about Brazil. "Not at all", he replied, "In the early 1990s Brazil dismantled its nuclear weapons' program, and Argentina, its supposed enemy, has done the same." "But", I insisted, "Brazil still has its enrichment program and a reprocessing facility."

“We have no worries about Brazil”, he answered. “We see eye to eye.”

However Brazil still resists, in part, the probing eye of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the world’s nuclear watchdog.

In 1979 the attitude of the Carter administration toward Pakistan, then attempting to build its bomb, was almost as harsh as toward Iran today.

The White House suspended all military aid, even though the Taliban were a lurking potential threat. However, when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in December Carter persuaded Congress to restart a large-scale arms program. For the next decade, in return for Pakistan’s help in building up the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen fighters in Afghanistan who later went to work for Osama Bin Laden, Washington turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s effort to build nuclear weapons.

Only in 1990, with the Soviets driven out of Afghanistan, did President George Bush (Senior) decide to cut off military assistance. This was reversed under his son, George W. Bush, as Washington wooed Islamabad for help in defeating the Taliban and hunting down Al-Qaeda members. Not only was the bomb tolerated, not much fuss was made when the U.S. discovered that Pakistan was acquiring nuclear knowledge and missiles from North Korea.

Likewise, there has been Washington’s long refusal to acknowledge what it has always known, but pretended not to, that Israel in the early 1960s built a secret nuclear reactor in the Negev desert.

Israel has never lacked an adequate conventional force but its unnecessary nuclear weapons have been a constant provocation to both the Arab states and Iran.

Even when the West has only offered peaceful nuclear assistance meant for nuclear power development, sometimes the recipient has used that as a base to go on to a nuclear weapons’ program. South Africa is a good example. During apartheid days U.S. aid included the construction of a nuclear research reactor, the supply of highly enriched uranium and the training of nuclear scientists. Providing these skills gave key scientists tremendous political influence. In 1968 they convinced the government to fund the construction of a pilot enrichment plant. In 1968 they persuaded it to allow them to develop nuclear weapons.

The Soviet Union did the same with North Korea, training nuclear scientists and completing construction of the Yongbyon research reactor in 1965. Later Pyongyang used this facility to produce plutonium, which was then used to explode a nuclear bomb three years ago.

Something similar happened with India. In 1955 India built its first research reactor using British-supplied designs. A year later Canada supplied India with a research reactor. Next the U.S. provided a key ingredient, heavy water, and trained over a 1,000 Indian nuclear scientists. In 1961 India began construction of a reprocessing plant designed to extract plutonium from spent nuclear fuel.

Pakistan began to develop its bomb after Munir Ahmad Khan, chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, and other top scientists were trained in America. Canada and West European countries helped construct and operate enrichment centers.

The West and Russia need to rethink more than the Obama administration thus far is doing. They should offer all the civilian nuclear cooperation Iran can swallow in return for open books and regular intrusive inspections of all facilities old and new. And they should offer to end all political and economic estrangement.

There is no good reason why if the West plays its cards well, it couldn’t help Iran become another Turkey, democratic, pro-Western and bomb -free. But first the West and Russia must raise the curtain on their past, and in Brazil’s case present, hypocrisy and irresponsibility.

<http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2009/08/20/82385.html>

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