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New York Times
October 27, 2007
Pg. 7

Iranians Dismiss Sanctions From U.S.

By Nazila Fathi

TEHRAN, Oct. 26 — Iran's chief nuclear negotiator on Friday dismissed the sweeping new sanctions announced by the Bush administration against an elite unit of the Revolutionary Guard in Iran as insignificant and said they would have no effect on the country's nuclear policies, the news agency ISNA reported.

The United States on Thursday designated the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard and four state-owned Iranian banks as supporters of terrorism, and the Guard itself as an illegal exporter of ballistic missiles. The decision raised the temperature in America's confrontation with Iran over terrorism and nuclear weapons.

"These sanctions are nothing new," Saeed Jalili, who was appointed as Iran's negotiator last week, said after returning to Tehran from Rome, ISNA reported. "Sanctions have been imposed on us for the past 28 years. The new sanctions, like those before, will have no effect on Iran's policies."

Also reacting to the announcement by the United States, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, warned that it was ready to defend the country if it came under attack. ISNA quoted him as saying the Guard would respond to any attack "fiercely."

Iran's prior nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, who accompanied Mr. Jalili to talks in Rome with the European Union about Iran's nuclear activities, said the negotiations were favorable. While Iran's relations with the United States remain troubled, he said, Iran intends to continue its cooperation with the United Nations nuclear agency.

"Our views have become closer since two years ago when we started the talks and we had very different views," he told reporters, ISNA said. "I am not saying that we had agreements, but we can reach a final conclusion if the talks continue this way."

Nazila Fathi reported from Tehran and Helene Cooper from Washington.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/27/world/asia/27iran.html>

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New York Times

October 27, 2007

Pg. 7

Yet Another Photo Of Site In Syria, Yet More Questions

By William J. Broad and Mark Mazzetti

The mystery surrounding the construction of what might have been a nuclear reactor in Syria deepened yesterday, when a company released a satellite photo showing that the main building was well under way in September 2003 — four years before Israeli jets bombed it.

The long genesis is likely to raise questions about whether the Bush administration overlooked a nascent atomic threat in Syria while planning and executing a war in Iraq, which was later found to have no active nuclear program. A senior American intelligence official said yesterday that American analysts had looked carefully at the site from its early days, but were unsure then whether it posed a nuclear threat.

In the time before the Iraq war, President Bush and his senior advisers sounded many alarms about Baghdad's reconstituting its nuclear program. But they have never publicly discussed what many analysts say appears to have been a long-running nuclear effort next door.

Yesterday independent analysts, examining the latest satellite image, suggested that work on the site might have begun around 2001, and the senior intelligence official agreed with that analysis. That early date is potentially significant in terms of North Korea's suspected aid to Syria, suggesting that North Korea could have begun its assistance in the late 1990s.

A dispute has broken out between conservatives and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over the administration's pursuit of diplomacy with North Korea in the face of intelligence that North Korea might have helped Syria design a nuclear reactor.

The new image may give ammunition to those in the administration, including Ms. Rice, who call for diplomacy. If North Korea started its Syrian aid long ago, the officials could argue that the assistance was historical, not current, and that diplomacy should move ahead.

The progress of the site in late 2003 also raises new questions about a disagreement at the time between intelligence analysts and John R. Bolton, then the State Department's top arms control official.

In the summer of 2003, Mr. Bolton's testimony on Capitol Hill was delayed after a dispute erupted in part over whether Syria was actively pursuing a nuclear weapon. Some intelligence officials said Mr. Bolton overstated the Syrian threat.

"There was disagreement about what Syria was interested in and how much we should be monitoring it," Mr. Bolton said in an interview yesterday. "There was activity in Syria that I felt was evidence that they were trying to develop a nuclear program."

Mr. Bolton declined to say whether he had knowledge at the time about the site that the Israelis struck in September. Spokesmen for the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council declined to comment.

The new image of the desolate Syrian site was released yesterday by GeoEye, in Dulles, Va. Mark Brender, the company's vice president for communications and marketing, said the picture was taken on Sept. 16, 2003. He

added that the image had been collected as part of the company's agenda of building a large archive of global images.

Earlier this week, federal and private analysts identified the precise location of the Syrian site, and since then rival companies have raced to release images. The site is on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, 90 miles north of the Iraqi border.

Images taken in August, before the Israeli raid, show a tall building about 150 feet wide on each side that analysts suspect might have sheltered a half-built nuclear reactor. Also visible is a pumping station on the Euphrates, which may be significant because reactors need water for cooling.

John E. Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, a private group in Alexandria, Va., that analyzes satellite images, said the 2003 picture showed the tall building in the midst of early construction, surrounded by churned earth. He put the groundbreaking in 2001.

"It's uncommon to see such activity in the middle of nowhere," he said, adding that it was sufficiently unusual to have worried American intelligence officials. "I'd have put it on my suspect site list and kept watching," he said. The senior intelligence official said that American spy satellites and analysts had, in fact, watched the site for years. "It was noticed, without knowing what it was," the official said. "You revisit every so often, but it was not a high priority. You see things that raise the flag and you know you have to keep looking. It was a case of watching it evolve."

Jeffrey Lewis, an expert on nuclear proliferation at the New America Foundation in Washington, said it was surprising from the photos how little progress had been made at the site between 2003 and 2007.

But Mr. Lewis said it was ironic that Syria might have been trying to build a nuclear program just as the United States was invading Iraq in the fear that Iraq was developing nuclear arms.

William J. Broad reported from New York, and Mark Mazzetti from Washington.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/27/world/middleeast/27syria.html>

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San Diego Union-Tribune
October 28, 2007

Military Downs Missile In Test

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON – The military shot down a Scud-type missile in the latest successful test of a new technology meant to knock down ballistic missiles in their final minute of flight, the Missile Defense Agency said yesterday. A ship off the Hawaiian island of Kauai fired a target missile late Friday night. Minutes later, soldiers with the U.S. Army's 6th Air Defense Artillery Brigade launched an interceptor missile from Kauai that destroyed the target over the Pacific, the agency said.

The military says it already can shoot down missiles in the last stage of flight by using Patriot anti-missile batteries. The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system would be able to protect larger areas than the Patriot system because it intercepts targets at higher altitude.

The new system had its first successful test last year at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico and two more successful tests this year at the Pacific Missile Range Facility on Kauai. Yesterday's announcement said the most recent test was the 31st "hit to kill" intercept in 39 tests since 2001 by ground-and sea-based interceptors against short-, medium-and long-range ballistic missile targets.

http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20071028/news_1n28missile.html

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Houston Chronicle
October 28, 2007

At The Heart Of New Nuclear Weapons

Pantex looks to build plutonium cores in addition to disassembly

By Mark Babineck, Houston Chronicle

PANHANDLE — The United States ran the Cold War arms race in a fortified pasture on Amarillo's outskirts. The sprawling Pantex Plant is where workers put together nuclear warheads for decades, competing with the Soviets who were doing the same. But once the Iron Curtain fell, the plant kicked into reverse and became the primary atomic bomb disassembly site.

In the next few weeks, a unit of the Department of Energy is set to release a plan outlining the future of the nation's arsenal, envisioned to consist of 1,700 to 2,200 newly designed warheads. There's little question they, like their predecessors, will be assembled here.

Pantex also is one of five sites under consideration for a new "consolidated plutonium center" to process and build the lethal hearts of nuclear warheads — the plutonium cores that cause the mushroom-cloud detonations when properly triggered.

The cores, known as "pits," traditionally have been made at Los Alamos, N.M., and the now-defunct Rocky Flats Plant near Denver. That kind of work hasn't been done at Pantex, and the prospect of it coming to the Panhandle plains has resident anti-nuke activist Mavis Belisle gearing up like the old days.

"When you're talking about producing new plutonium or new plutonium cores, it doesn't matter where, we don't want it to happen at all," said Belisle, director of the Peace Farm, a 20-acre spread across the highway from the plant that has served as a permanent vigil against weapons of mass destruction since 1986.

There's plenty of local support, though. Gary Molberg wants to see them do a lot more at Pantex, which in addition to disassembly continues to maintain active weapons.

President and chief executive of the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce, Molberg is for anything that increases the size of the area's second-largest private employer, with an estimated 3,200 workers.

"The mission they're doing right now will continue on, and we hope they get some additional missions and have some expansion out there," he said.

The 'soap plant'

The 16,000-acre Pantex Ordnance Plant began in 1942 as a conventional weapons site, then closed once the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki — both weapons built at Los Alamos — forced Japan's surrender in 1945. Texas Tech took over the property.

But with the Cold War raging in 1951, the Army reclaimed 10,000 acres and contractor Mason & Hanger remodeled the facility to assemble explosives for atomic bombs. Procter & Gamble operated it for a short time, prompting locals to refer to the secret operation as the "soap plant."

"Although everyone knew they didn't make soap," Belisle said.

By the 1960s, the Atomic Energy Commission had taken over from the Army, making the plant's duties more obvious. Still, Pantex managed to keep a low profile despite the steady flow of conspicuous "white trains" ferrying new warheads out the gates.

Pantex drew unwanted scrutiny in March 1977 when three workers died in an accidental plastic explosives detonation, making the general public aware of its peculiar specialty. The Red River Peace Network started protesting outside the gates in the early 1980s, Belisle said, and the Peace Farm started across from the Pantex rail entrance in 1986.

Things changed fast after that. Rocky Flats closed in 1989, and the Cold War ended in 1991. The U.S. complex of nuclear weapons sites has been reinventing itself ever since.

"Right now, we have buildings that date back to 1945. They're crumbling, unsafe and inefficient," said John Broehm, spokesman for the National Nuclear Security Administration, the DOE unit in charge of bomb-building.

"Also, we have special nuclear material — plutonium, highly enriched uranium — spread out over seven of the eight sites. What we want to do is consolidate some of the special nuclear material, get rid of buildings, reduce the footprint physically.

"It's 1950s-1960s manufacturing versus 21st century manufacturing. You could do a lot more with a lot less space."

Speaking at a Department of Energy public hearing last year, Amarillo Mayor Debra McCartt testified that the estimated 13,000-plus warhead cores in storage (the exact figure is classified) means "virtually all of the nation's plutonium is already here at Pantex," so the site makes sense for a new plutonium operation.

"The department could not find a more congenial place for a proposed center," she added, noting high local approval ratings for Pantex in various polls.

Longtime Amarillo resident Allen Finegold wasn't so congenial. "We have no experience dealing with plutonium here. Rocky Flats had that experience. It wasn't a very good one," he said.

Rocky Flats ceased plutonium work after an FBI probe uncovered environmental violations that resulted in the discovery of rampant contamination and millions of dollars in fines and judgments against contractors. The massive cleanup was only certified as complete by the Environmental Protection Agency on June 11.

The government, which is trying to come up with a "Reliable Replacement Warhead" design that can be tested on a computer rather than physically, says it has learned from past mistakes.

"This design we know will last far into the future, components in there will last longer, that sort of thing," he said.

"The weapon itself will be more secure, safer for workers and the environment."

Standing their ground

In 2004, President Bush called for the weapons stockpile to be halved by 2012. Beyond that, the idea is to substitute antiquated systems with the new models and maintain a tiny stockpile compared to the peak, which surpassed 32,000 in 1966.

The last time intensive plutonium work was proposed for Pantex was in the mid-1990s when it competed for a plant to convert weapons-grade plutonium into fuel for nuclear reactors. Belisle and others fought the so-called MOX fuel fabricator, in part citing existing aquifer contamination from World War II-era activities. The Savannah River Site in South Carolina won the plant.

Ironically, Belisle's preferred course for Pantex is for it to keep storing a growing cache of decommissioned plutonium cores, which she said is safer than transporting them half a continent away for MOX processing. While there's no risk of accidental nuclear explosion, Belisle worries that a mishap in transit could cause a release of radioactive plutonium.

She hasn't learned to love the bomb, only to live with it. And the Peace Farm will continue to joust with Amarillo's business elite and its nuclear neighbors over the site's future as long as troubling potential new tasks keep cropping up.

"We haven't really won any ground," she said, "but we haven't really lost any."

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/5251489.html>

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New York Times
October 29, 2007

Security Upgrades at Several Nuclear Sites Are Lagging, Auditors Find

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 — More than a year after Congress told the Energy Department to harden the nation's nuclear bomb factories and laboratories against terrorist raids, at least 5 of the 11 sites are certain to miss their deadlines, some by many years.

The Energy Department has put off security improvements at some sites that store plutonium because it plans to consolidate the material at central locations, but the Government Accountability Office said in a Senate briefing that that project was also likely to lag. A copy of the briefing materials was provided to The New York Times by a private group, the Project on Government Oversight, which has long been pushing for better security at the weapons sites.

Danielle Brian, the group's executive director, said that although the deadline set by Congress was tight, if the Energy Department "had taken seriously consolidating and making this an expedited effort, they wouldn't be having these problems now."

Robert Alvarez, an adviser to the energy secretary in the Clinton administration, said there was wide agreement that centralizing the fuel was a good idea. But Mr. Alvarez added, "There's a lot of pushback about moving fissile materials from a site, because then you lose a portion of your budget and prestige."

The Energy Department declined requests for an interview, but Michael Kilpatrick, a deputy chief at the department's Office of Health, Safety and Security, said in a statement that the steps under way were "further enhancements and better protection to some of the most secure facilities in the country."

But Representative Edward J. Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat who has taken a particular interest in nuclear security, said in a statement, "The department seems to think that the terrorist threat to its nuclear facilities is no more serious than a Halloween prank, as evidenced by its failure — more than six years after the 9/11 attacks — to do what it must to keep our stores of nuclear-weapons-grade materials secure." Mr. Markey said the delay was unsurprising but unacceptable.

One site that will miss its deadline by years is the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, which holds a large stock of weapons-usable uranium. The laboratory plans to dilute the uranium, but that will take until 2015, the auditors found.

Two other sites that will miss their deadlines are operated by the National Nuclear Security Administration, which is responsible for weapons security. The agency was established in 1999 after a number of security breaches in the weapons complex, and in January its director was forced to resign because of other security lapses.

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Energy Department changed its "design basis threat," the description of the attacking force against which the weapons sites should prepare their defenses. The details of this design basis threat are classified, but the new definition specifies a larger and more capable group of attackers.

To emphasize the importance of the preparations, Congress wrote into law that the Energy Department sites should submit plans on how the department would meet the requirements. Recognizing that much of the department's work runs far behind schedule, Congress specified that if a delay were necessary, it would have to be approved by the secretary or deputy secretary of energy.

An unclassified version of the Energy Department's first report to Congress, in July 2006, said that more than \$420 million had been spent in the previous three years in an "aggressive" program. Among the changes was giving security officers armored vehicles and large-caliber weapons. That change reduced "the need to hire more security officers to account for the expected attrition that would be a natural result of the increased adversary force."

The department has rewritten its design basis threat several times. Mr. Kilpatrick said in his statement that all sites now met the 2003 version of the design basis threat and were working toward the current version, set in 2005.

The Energy Department told Congress in 2006 that six sites would meet the 2008 deadline. But the accountability office said that one of those, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, would not make the deadline.

The Energy Department said work at the five other sites would be completed later; those are the Nevada Test Site, the Hanford nuclear reservation in Washington State, the Idaho National Laboratory, the Los Alamos National Laboratory and Y-12, a weapons site in Tennessee.

The G.A.O. said in July that the Idaho National Laboratory would not be done until 2013, four years later than the Energy Department's estimate.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/29/washington/29nuke.html?_r=1&ref=washington&oref=slogin

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USA Today
October 28, 2007

Concern raised about anti-Iran rhetoric

WASHINGTON (AP) — The head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog said Sunday he had no evidence Iran was working actively to build nuclear weapons and expressed concern that escalating rhetoric from the U.S. could bring disaster.

"We have information that there has been maybe some studies about possible weaponization," said Mohamed ElBaradei, who leads the International Atomic Energy Agency. "That's why we have said that we cannot give Iran a pass right now, because there is still a lot of question marks."

"But have we seen Iran having the nuclear material that can readily be used into a weapon? No. Have we seen an active weaponization program? No." Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice accused Iran this month of "lying" about the aim of its nuclear program. She said there is no doubt Tehran wants the capability to produce nuclear weapons and has deceived the IAEA about its intentions.

Vice President Dick Cheney has raised the prospect of "serious consequences" if Iran were found to be working toward developing a nuclear weapon. Last week, the Bush administration announced harsh penalties against the Iranian military and state-owned banking systems in hopes of raising pressure on the world financial system to cut ties with Tehran.

ElBaradei said he was worried about the growing rhetoric from the U.S., which he noted focused on Iran's alleged intentions to build a nuclear weapon rather than evidence the country was actively doing so. If there is actual evidence, ElBaradei said he would welcome seeing it.

"I'm very much concerned about confrontation, building confrontation, because that would lead absolutely to a disaster. I see no military solution. The only durable solution is through negotiation and inspection," he said.

"My fear is that if we continue to escalate from both sides that we will end up into a precipice, we will end up into an abyss. As I said, the Middle East is in a total mess, to say the least. And we cannot add fuel to the fire," ElBaradei added.

Sen. Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, agreed that the current "hot rhetoric" from the U.S. could prove dangerous.

"We ought to make it clear that there's always a military option if Iran goes nuclear, but that we ought to just speak more softly because these hot words that are coming out of the administration, this hot rhetoric plays right into the hands of the fanatics in Iran," said Levin, D-Mich.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said strong action might be needed because he does not believe the United Nations adequately has kept Iran in check.

"I think the United Nations' efforts to sanction Iran have been pitiful because of Russia and China vetoing a resolution. The European Union has some sanctions. They're fairly weak."

"So in this regard, I agree with the following, that the diplomatic efforts to control Iran need to continue. They need to be more robust but we're sending mixed signals," Graham said.

ElBaradei spoke on CNN's *Late Edition*, and Levin and Graham appeared on CBS' "Face the Nation."

http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-10-28-us-iran_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip

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REUTERS

U.S., Russia urge other states to join missile pact

Sun Oct 28, 2007 2:42pm EDT

By Conor Sweeney

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia and the United States urged all countries to destroy medium range nuclear-capable missiles, in a joint declaration by the former Cold War foes published by the Russian foreign ministry on Sunday. Concerned that an increasing number of states, including Iran and North Korea, have the technology to make missiles that can travel 5,500 km (3,400 miles), they are calling for their 20-year-old bilateral treaty to become global in character.

"We believe that renunciation of ground-launched intermediate- and shorter-range missiles and their complete elimination in the world would increase the role of the treaty as a model for strengthening international security," the U.S and Russian declaration said.

The statement on the treaty on the elimination of intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles was released to coincide with the 62nd session of the General Assembly in New York on October 25.

Russia has been pressing the U.S to rewrite what is commonly referred to as the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), by including countries other than ex-Soviet nations and the United States.

The treaty, signed by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in December 1987, was a milestone in arms control which lead to the scrapping of 2,692 missiles in total.

The joint statement called on "all interested countries to discuss the possibility of imparting a global character to this important regime through the renunciation of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km, leading to the destruction of any such missiles".

President Vladimir Putin told U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice this month that Russia would find it difficult to stay in the INF unless it was expanded to include other countries' armaments.

His comments were backed up by a warning from Russia's rocket forces commander on Friday that the Kremlin could resume production of missiles if others do not observe the treaty.

"If there is a political decision to make such a class of missile, then it is obvious that they will be made in Russia in the near future because we have everything we need, Colonel-General Nikolai Solovtsov said.

Apart from U.S. enemies such as North Korea and Iran, other countries like Israel, India and Pakistan have started building arsenals of intermediate-range missiles. Although some possess nuclear weapons, none of them is constrained by the INF treaty.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSL2870943420071028>

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Washington Post

October 30, 2007

Page B01

Army Digging To Recover Old Gas Shells

By Steve Vogel, Washington Post Staff Writer

Operating under tight safety restrictions, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers yesterday began excavating what it calls the "last known burial pit" of World War I chemical munitions in Northwest Washington's Spring Valley neighborhood.

The Army expects to excavate at least fifteen 75mm artillery rounds -- a dozen or more with mustard gas and three with arsine, both toxic chemical agents -- buried in the affluent residential neighborhood that was once a site for developing and testing chemical weapons.

To protect the neighborhood from an accidental release of gases, the Army has erected a large metal containment structure over the pit in the 4800 block of Glenbrook Road, next to an unoccupied home behind American University.

Tan fabric covering the structure is designed to contain and filter chemical vapors, and sirens will warn residents living within a safety zone running 742 feet in every direction from the pit -- the distance based on calculations of the danger from a detonation of a round of arsine, which officials describe as the more "worrisome" of the chemicals because of its volatility.

All residents inside the zone, which includes parts of AU and 49 homes, have been given instructions to stay indoors and not try to leave the area. In a letter to the campus last month, AU President Neil Kerwin called a chemical release "highly unlikely" but said the school would remain "vigilant."

Shortly after 10 a.m. yesterday, an operator inside the containment structure radioed to the project's command post that chemical detection equipment was ready. "We're getting ready to begin digging operations," he radioed.

"Roger -- take everything slow and easy," replied Scott Wunschel, safety officer for the project, who was seated at a computer in a trailer on the campus. A mini-excavator, visible on screens inside the command post, began digging up the soil and loading it into blue barrels.

With that, the latest round of a seemingly unending cleanup operation was underway. The Spring Valley operation dates to 1993, when the discovery of an artillery round by a construction crew triggered an evacuation and cleanup. More discoveries and excavations followed, as research showed that the Army testing operation during World War I was more extensive than realized.

The presence of the shells sparked concerns about health hazards from chemicals in the ground. Earlier this year, a review by researchers from the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health found no relationship between cancer cases and chemicals in the ground in Spring Valley but recommended continued environmental tracking.

The canisters buried at the Glenbrook Road site were seen during a previous excavation but could not be recovered because the landowner would not allow further digging. The university now owns the land.

The excavation was supposed to begin in August but was delayed when AU requested additional safety measures, including an extra layer of aluminum sheeting around the containment unit and an air quality monitor between the excavation pit and the AU campus.

"We've got a very robust metal cover to protect against fragmentation," said Army Corps of Engineers Capt. Drew White, the site operations officer.

The project includes a dozen workers in the containment area and 20 to 30 outside the area, including chemical weapons specialists from the Army's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center.

Officials from agencies working with the Corps said the precautions for the excavation are adequate. "All of the public safety measures being implemented are conservative and cover a wide range of protection for human health and the environment," said Steven Hirsh, an official with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

White said the Army is hoping this excavation, expected to last 14 weeks, will be the last major operation in Spring Valley. "We've got more investigating to do but don't believe we have anything more extensive than this to do," he said.

After testing inside the containment area, blue barrels of soil dug up yesterday were taken to a federal holding site near Sibley Hospital in preparation for further study and eventual disposal elsewhere.

The munitions are believed to be about 10 feet deep, and none was recovered yesterday. "Just lots and lots of dirt," White said.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/29/AR2007102901923.html>

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Los Angeles Times

October 30, 2007

U.N. Still Probing Iran Nuclear Case

The head of a watchdog agency says he can't verify that the nation's program is purely for peaceful purposes.

By Maggie Farley, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

UNITED NATIONS — The head of the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog agency said Monday that the inquiry into Iran's nuclear case was not closed, as the country's president proclaimed to the United Nations last month, and called it regrettable that Iran continued to enrich uranium despite the Security Council's demand to stop the process.

Mohamed ElBaradei's annual report to the General Assembly in New York hinted that, despite his best efforts to persuade Iran to come clean on its nuclear program, the International Atomic Energy Agency could not verify that Iran's program was purely for peaceful energy purposes. That finding may open the door for the Security Council to consider even harsher sanctions on Iran next month.

But ElBaradei said that none of Iran's declared nuclear material had been diverted toward making a weapon, and that Iran had answered questions about past clandestine plutonium experiments.

Those developments gave him hope that Iran would resolve unanswered issues about its secretive nuclear program and avoid further penalties and threats from frustrated Security Council members.

ElBaradei has made clear that he prefers negotiation over confrontation, and that he believes that if Iran is actually trying to build a weapon, it is still years away from being able to do so.

"We have said that we cannot give Iran a pass right now, because there's still a lot of question marks," the Egyptian diplomat told CNN's Wolf Blitzer on Sunday. "But have we seen Iran having the nuclear material that can readily be used into a weapon? No. Have we seen an active weaponization program? No. So there is a concern, but there is also time to clarify these concerns."

He chided the Bush administration for attempting to increase pressure on Iran, saying that "we should continue to stop spinning and hyping the Iranian issue because that's an issue that could have a major conflagration, and not only regionally, but globally."

ElBaradei's stance has put him in repeated conflict with the Bush administration, which tried to scuttle his election for a second term as the atomic energy agency's director-general. The U.S. is leading efforts in the Security Council to impose a new round of economic and political penalties on Tehran, a move that has been tempered repeatedly by China and Russia.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., said the Security Council's permanent members and Germany were preparing a resolution with tougher measures in anticipation of ElBaradei's report on Iran's cooperation, expected in mid-November.

"We believe that the Iranian nuclear issue is one of the most important, defining issues of our time," Khalilzad said. "And given the record of this regime, the rhetoric of this regime, the policies of this regime, the connections of this regime, it cannot be acceptable for it to develop the capability to produce nuclear weapons."

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-nukes30oct30,1,6211326.story?coll=la-headlines-world>

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New York Times

October 31, 2007

Securing Russian Nuclear Missiles? U.S. Is Set To Say 'Done'

By C. J. Chivers

MOSCOW, Oct. 30 — With a final inspection planned for Wednesday at a secret nuclear missile base in the Ural Mountains, the United States expects to complete a program of security improvements for Russia's network of strategic nuclear rocket forces, according to two American officials involved in the effort.

The program to improve the security at 25 classified sites on 12 Russian bases, agreed to by President Bush and President Vladimir V. Putin at a meeting in Slovakia in 2005, will have been finished two years ahead of schedule. It includes measures that have long been part of American efforts to ensure that none of Russia's nuclear weapons or materials, poorly secured after the Soviet Union collapsed, fall out of government control. They include alarm and motion-detection systems, modern gates, guardhouses and fighting positions, as well as detectors for explosives, radiation and metal.

The program's completion ahead of schedule appeared to have political as well as security significance at a time when relations between the countries have been strained.

Two American nonproliferation officials said the new round of nuclear security upgrades shows that even in times of renewed tension between Washington and the Kremlin, American teams have been working closely with Russian officials at some of the country's most classified sites.

In a telephone interview, William H. Tobey, a senior nonproliferation official at the National Nuclear Security Administration, said the program had reduced the chance of unauthorized access at the nuclear weapon sites and that it was "continued evidence of this bright spot in U.S.-Russian relations."

Relations between Russia and the United States have soured on a number of issues, including the Iranian nuclear program and the Bush administration's insistence on the need to build missile defenses in Europe, a proposal that has alarmed the Kremlin.

As recently as last week, Mr. Putin publicly compared the disagreement over the need for a missile defense system, and the United States' plans to build it near Russia, to the Cuban missile crisis. On Monday, the Russian military claimed to have conducted more than 20 long-range flights with its aging fleet of strategic nuclear bombers, and said a similar number of flights were planned for this week.

Russia has also taken to broadcasting state-controlled news reports of tests of cruise missiles and powerful conventional weapons, drawing comparisons to American systems and suggesting that the tests are necessary because of threats from the West.

Russian and American politicians and security analysts have suggested that some of Mr. Putin's statements, and the nationalist content on Kremlin-controlled television networks, have been tied to the election season here.

Parliamentary elections are scheduled for early December, and a presidential election to select Mr. Putin's successor is planned for the spring.

The election season has arrived against a backdrop of rising inflation and steeply climbing living costs. At the same time, Russia is facing criticism from the West about its behavior, including its record of nondemocratic elections and the use of energy and trade levers, in the West's view, to punish governments that have challenged its authority. The continuing work at the missile bases, however, belies the intensity of some of the Kremlin's statements, showing that Mr. Putin's government continues to collaborate on strategically delicate nonproliferation programs. Mr. Tobey and another official at the security administration, a semiautonomous arm of the Department of Energy, declined to provide many details of the final inspection and work, saying that under the agreement with Russia many elements of the program remain classified.

But he said the security upgrades had been conducted at bunkers, rail transfer points and so-called mating facilities, where warheads are joined to rocket systems. In all, he said, the work cost about \$150 million, and was paid for by the United States.

He said work on other security and nonproliferation programs was also ahead of schedule. Among them are plans to install radiation detectors at all Russian border crossings by 2011 and an effort to finish construction in 2009 of fossil-fuel power plants in Siberia to replace the last three nuclear power plants in Russia that produce plutonium.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/31/world/europe/31russia.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin

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Los Angeles Times

October 31, 2007

Pg. 1

Wider Iranian Threat Is Feared

Many U.S. officials believe small conflicts on the ground or at sea are potentially riskier than a nuclear program.

By Paul Richter and Peter Spiegel, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

WASHINGTON — While the White House dwells on Iran's nuclear program, senior U.S. diplomats and military officers fear that an incident on the ground in Iraq is a more likely trigger for a possible confrontation with the Islamic Republic.

In one sign of their concern, U.S. military policymakers are weighing whether to release some of the Iranian personnel they have taken into custody in Iraq. Doing so could reduce the risk that radical Iranian elements might seize U.S. military or diplomatic personnel to retaliate, thus raising the danger of an escalation, a senior Defense official said.

The Bush administration has charged that Iran is funding anti-American fighters in Iraq and sending in sophisticated explosives to bleed the U.S. mission, although some of the administration's charges are disputed by Iraqis as well as the Iranians. Still, the diplomatic and military officials say they fear that the overreaching of a confident Iran, combined with growing U.S. frustrations, could set off a dangerous collision.

An unintended clash over Iraq "is very much on people's minds," said an American diplomat, who like others spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to publicly express his views.

A U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, despite recent heated rhetoric from the White House, today "seems more remote," he added.

An on-the-ground clash could be sparked, say current and former officials, by a confrontation along the 900-mile-long border between Iran and Iraq, or in the waters of the Persian Gulf. Or it could be ignited over one of the periodic U.S. attempts to arrest those the Americans assert are members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iraq.

The U.S. military might also retaliate if a bombing in Iraq killed a large number of U.S. troops and there was clear evidence of Iranian involvement, U.S. officials have warned.

One senior U.S. military official said the risk of war was now ever present in the Persian Gulf region. He described it as a "sleeping dog" that could be all too easily roused.

This current of thinking appears to be widely shared among many operational-level U.S. diplomats and military officers. Though these American officials are not among the handful of senior aides with whom President Bush consults in making final policy decisions on Iran, they are nonetheless influential as debate continues between hawks and moderates on how to handle the issue.

Many of them judge a U.S. attack on the Iranian nuclear program less likely because of the administration's stated emphasis on diplomacy, the strained condition of the U.S. military, and worries that an attack could set off Iranian retaliation without halting Tehran's nuclear program for long.

In the Pentagon, the shift in thinking has occurred in part because many in the department's leadership -- including Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates -- have concluded that a strike against suspected Iranian nuclear sites could be counterproductive, senior Defense officials said.

Washington charges that Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons, whereas Tehran says it is seeking to produce nuclear energy for civilian purposes.

Gates believes that bombing the nuclear sites would probably slow but not stop the Iranian nuclear effort while building domestic support for the program in Iran and undermining the international diplomatic effort to pressure Tehran to give up its suspected nuclear ambitions, said the senior Defense Department official.

"The nuclear program is still clearly years down the road," the official added.

"The more immediate threat is Iranian meddling and arms supplies into Iraq."

J. Scott Carpenter, a former top State Department official in the Bush administration now with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that despite warnings from some quarters that the administration was close to launching an attack on the nuclear facilities, "there is a lot of trepidation and circumspection" within the corridors of Washington power.

On the other hand, the risk of a collision on the ground in Iraq has been growing since January, when Bush condemned Iran's activities in Iraq, threatened to destroy Iranian networks he said were providing military gear to anti-U.S. forces, and dispatched additional warships and other military hardware to the region.

Suddenly, U.S. officials who had been complaining publicly that Iran was broadly meddling were now accusing Tehran of responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of U.S. troops. They focused especially on the activities of the Quds Force, an elite and ideologically motivated unit of the Revolutionary Guard Corps that the U.S. believes has sent hundreds of members across the porous border with Iraq to help train and provide weaponry to anti-American militias.

U.S. intelligence officials continue to track the flow of weapons they say come from Iran, and believe that in addition to much-publicized explosively formed projectiles -- roadside bombs that can penetrate armored vehicles -- Iran is supplying rocket-propelled grenades, shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles and large rocket launchers, according to a senior military official in Baghdad.

However, U.S. military officials have provided limited evidence of these charges, and some outside analysts and foreign officials remain dubious of the extent of Tehran's involvement.

Military officials said U.S. concern about Iranian motives increased after members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps seized 15 British sailors and marines at gunpoint March 23 on disputed charges that they were in Iranian coastal waters.

Although the British personnel were released after 13 days, the incident convinced the U.S. military that Tehran was willing to break international rules, the senior officer said. U.S. military commanders have since reviewed many of their procedures in an attempt to prevent American military personnel from falling into a similar situation.

The senior U.S. military official said that any American forces threatened with capture would be under orders to fight back, because capture would put their lives at risk.

U.S. Navy officials worry in particular about the Quds Force, which they say is expanding a fleet of more than 1,000 small attack boats, and which is separate from the normal chain of command of the Iranian navy. They say the force, which is not believed to be under the full control of the Iranian leadership, could mount small-scale but provocative attacks.

U.S. forces are themselves involved in high-risk operations considered provocative by Iranians and critics of the U.S. In January, when U.S. forces seized five Iranians from Iran's northern consular office in Irbil, Iraq, their real goal was to pick up a senior official of the Revolutionary Guard Corps who they believed was with the group, according to two former U.S. officials.

If they had captured a senior official of the guard, "it would have raised the ante pretty high with the Iranians," said Bruce Riedel, a longtime CIA analyst and a former White House National Security Council aide now with the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

"The risk is that events on the ground can get out of the control of policy planners in Washington or Tehran and can create explosive situations that may go further than anyone on either side wanted," Riedel said.

Former officials say one goal of U.S. operations in Iraq is to provide convincing proof to an outside world that is often skeptical of American warnings about Tehran. But such an operation entails risks, analysts say.

The Pentagon has insisted on keeping the five Iranians in jail all year, despite the protests of Iranian and Iraqi officials, and over the urgings of some State Department officials and U.S. allies.

U.S. officials maintain that the five Iranians taken captive in Irbil were members of Iran's Quds Force, but Iraqi and Iranian officials insist they were credentialed diplomats.

The American military arrested a sixth Iranian in northern Iraq in September, saying he also was a Quds Force member who had supplied weapons and money to insurgents; Iraqis and Iranians said he was part of a business delegation traveling with the knowledge of the Iraqi government. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has demanded his release.

The Irbil operation was revealed because of a leak to the news media from an Iraqi source, and U.S. officials have hinted that more such operations are going on out of public view.

But U.S. officials appear to be coming to the conclusion that it is not worth holding some of the less valuable captives if it risks retaliation.

"It might be useful to cut them loose so [the Iranians] don't have an excuse to pick up someone as a bargaining chip," said the senior Defense official.

The senior military leadership also seems focused on the risks of retaliation in other ways.

Although some lawmakers and conservative commentators have been proposing attacks on Iranian armament supply lines and training camps within Iran, some senior Pentagon leaders are cool to the suggestions.

The new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy Adm. Michael G. Mullen, who has privately weighed in against an attack on Iranian nuclear sites, also in his first weeks has voiced opposition to striking supply lines inside Iran, saying interdiction efforts within Iraq are sufficient.

"I just don't think there's any stomach for it, and there's no need for it right now," said one official familiar with Mullen's thinking.

Pentagon officials are hoping for a continuation of a recent gradual decline in attacks from Iranian-backed groups, notably the Shiite militia loyal to anti-American cleric Muqtada Sadr. Officials aren't sure why there has been a falloff, but they hope it means that Iran has heard their warnings.

Nevertheless, American officials say they remain keenly aware of the vulnerability of their 160,000 troops in Iraq and the 27,000 U.S. personnel in Afghanistan.

"The military is going to be cautious about going after Iranians in Iraq, operations on the border or training camps in Iran itself," said Suzanne Maloney, a former State Department Iran analyst now at the Saban Center. "I think they realize this could escalate; it's the kind of war the military itself doesn't want."

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-usiran31oct31.0.1169663.story?coll=la-home-world>

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Washington Times

November 1, 2007

Pg. 14

U.S. Navy Rescue Features In Nuke Talks

By Nicholas Kravev, Washington Times

The U.S. Navy's rescue of a North Korean vessel from pirates figured yesterday in talks between chief American negotiator Christopher R. Hill and his North Korean counterpart, who finalized plans for disabling the North's main nuclear facility.

A U.S. team was due in the reclusive state today to oversee the disabling process.

Mr. Hill, speaking to reporters in Beijing, confirmed that the nuclear negotiators had discussed an incident Tuesday in which the USS James Williams helped several North Koreans after their vessel, the Dia Hong Dan with 22 sailors and a cargo of sugar, came under pirate attack off the coast of Somalia.

Two gunmen died and three crew members were badly wounded in gunbattles as the North Korean seafarers fought off the attackers, a maritime official was quoted by wire reports as saying.

"Six gunmen were also seriously injured in Tuesday's heavy fighting," said Andrew Mwangura, head of the Mombasa, Kenya-based East African Seafarers' Assistance Program. The U.S. Navy confirmed that the wounded North Koreans had been taken on board the James Williams to be treated.

Asked about the incident in Beijing, Mr. Hill said he and North Korean chief nuclear negotiator Kim Kye-gwan had "discussed the events that took place off the coast of Somalia ... with the incident involving the attempted takeover of the North Korean vessel by Somali pirates and the intercession of the U.S. Navy vessel."

Other U.S. officials said it was standard procedure for the Navy to provide humanitarian assistance in such a situation and that the nationality of the North Korean sailors had not influenced the decision to intervene.

Nevertheless, the action appeared likely to have established good will at a critical stage in the negotiations to end Pyongyang's nuclear programs.

"The incident will have a positive impact as a result of the efforts by both the U.S. and North Korea to normalize their diplomatic ties," said an unidentified South Korean Foreign Ministry official quoted by the Yonhap news agency.

Mr. Hill said yesterday's talks in Beijing went smoothly and that the American inspection team was on its way to North Korea.

"We weren't negotiating. We were more comparing notes. We are at a phase now where we're talking a lot about nuts and bolts," Mr. Hill said, according to a transcript provided by the State Department.

"There are three facilities in Yongbyon, and there are some procedures that have been agreed on to take apart the equipment there," he said. "So we think that will begin actually this week. We've had two site surveys by some technical teams. So we know precisely what is involved in that and what some of the measures need to be." Diplomats close to the negotiations said the heads of delegations in the six-nation talks on the North's nuclear programs were expected to meet later this month, and that the foreign ministers could meet in mid-December. Pyongyang has promised to disable Yongbyon and declare all of its nuclear efforts and materials by the end of the year, and to begin dismantling its programs next year in exchange for political and economic incentives, including better relations with the United States.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071101/FOREIGN/111010022/1003>

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Washington Post
November 1, 2007
Pg. 17

U.S. Official Is Faulted For Nuclear Weapons Claim

Experts Call 'Hair Trigger' Denial Misleading, Say Much of Arsenal Is Capable of Launch in Minutes

By Colum Lynch, Washington Post Staff Writer

UNITED NATIONS -- The Bush administration has come under fire for stating before a United Nations conference that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is not on "hair-trigger alert" -- an assertion that arms-control experts criticized as "inaccurate" and "misleading."

The allegations follow efforts by Washington to assure the United Nations that it is meeting its obligation -- under the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty -- to shrink its nuclear arsenal. They also come on the eve of a U.N. General Assembly vote on a resolution calling on the world's nuclear powers to take their nuclear weapons off "high alert." The nonbinding resolution calls on states to "decrease the operational readiness" of their nuclear weapons. "The maintenance of nuclear weapons systems at a high level of readiness increases the risk of the use of such weapons, including the unintentional or accidental use," the resolution warns.

Speaking at an Oct. 9 U.N. conference, Christina Rocca, the U.S. representative to the United Nations Conference on Disarmament, dismissed concerns that American nuclear missiles are ready to launch on a moment's notice. "U.S. nuclear forces are not and have never been on hair-trigger alert," she told U.N. delegates.

Her comments sparked rapid criticism. "It's plain wrong," said Hans Kristensen, director of nuclear information at the Federation of American Scientists. "There are forces on alert, and whether they are on 'hair-trigger alert' or 'launch on warning,' they are capable of launching in minutes."

The NPT requires the world's original nuclear powers -- the United States, Russia, China, France and Britain -- to engage in "good-faith" negotiations aimed at dismantling their nuclear weapons program.

In exchange, other states pledge to limit their development of nuclear energy to peaceful purposes.

Developing countries have accused Washington and other nuclear powers of renegeing on their obligations. The United States maintains that it has been meeting its side of the bargain, but that other states have not done enough to prohibit countries -- such as North Korea and Iran -- from developing clandestine nuclear weapons.

Rocca cited U.S.-Russian arms-control agreements over the past two decades that shed more than 3,000 tactical warheads and 1,000 strategic missiles and bombers from the U.S. stockpile. "The NPT never envisaged complete nuclear disarmament without regard to the international security environment," she said. "Nuclear weapons continue to have relevance."

A senior U.S. official said the claim that thousands of U.S. nuclear weapons can be launched within minutes is incorrect, but added that the information on launch time is classified. "The idea we are on Cuban-missile-crisis posture, sitting on the silo ready to push the button, is false," said the official, who was unauthorized to speak publicly. "The essence of deterrence strategy is having some element of ambiguity."

Bruce Blair, a nuclear weapons expert and president of the World Security Institute, said the United States and Russia keep about one-third of their strategic arsenals on launch-ready alert and that "hundreds of missiles armed with thousands of nuclear warheads can be launched within a very few minutes."

"There has been long history of denying U.S. forces are on 'hair-trigger alert' . . ." Blair said. "Some of that is based on lack of knowledge, and some of it is an evasion, and some of it is just an outright lie."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/31/AR2007103102801.html>

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Miami Herald
November 1, 2007

Dangerous Cuba-Iran Kinship

By Chris Simmons

Scott Carmichael, a senior counterintelligence officer with the Defense Intelligence Agency, recently confirmed continued intelligence sharing between Iran and Cuba. Additionally, Israeli sources report that during last year's meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Havana, Iranian and Cuban intelligence officers discussed increased collaboration in targeting the United States.

Close ties between Tehran and Havana have reportedly existed since Iran's revolutionary leadership came to power in 1979. Given both nations' sponsorship of terrorism, their continued collaboration imperils U.S. national security. In the past, Havana provided training and material to selected terrorist groups, some of which are Iranian allies. Today, Cuba remains a safe haven for some international terrorist groups and it allows safe transit to others. Furthermore, Iran's Interests Section and its Mission to the United Nations appear inadequately staffed for significant intelligence collection. This shortfall likely makes Tehran even more dependent on Havana's continued intelligence trafficking.

In 2006, Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz -- a career officer in Cuba's premier foreign intelligence service, the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) -- visited with senior Iranian government officials. This meeting followed his October 2003 meeting with President Mohammad Khatami on expanded ties between Havana and Tehran.

At the time, Cabrisas served under cover as a minister without portfolio. During their discussions, Khatami said reciprocal visits by officials of the two countries would lead to further expansion and consolidation of mutual ties. Khatami described his nation's ties with Havana as exemplary and claimed that closer Cuba-Iran cooperation would benefit the entire world. Cabrisas publicly focused on Havana's willingness to broaden ties with Tehran and underlined the need to bolster economic cooperation. The meeting called for the recurring visits by officials, scientists and others to develop these enhanced ties.

Since at least 1996, the DI has targeted U.S. technologies beneficial to the Cuban economy. With one of the most advanced biotechnology industries in the emerging world, Castro successfully made biotechnology a building block of the Cuban economy. Cuba now holds more than 400 biotechnology patents and earns considerable foreign currency through its sales of biotechnology products to more than 50 nations. Tehran and Havana first began collaborative work on dual-use biotechnologies in the early 1990s.

Acting on behalf of Tehran, in July 2003, Cuban intelligence jammed the transmissions of the National Iranian Television (NITV), the Voice of America and three other Iran-bound broadcasts. The extended jamming coincided with Tehran's crackdown on the dissident commemoration of the historic 1999 student uprising.

Loral Skynet, owners of the targeted satellite, quickly traced the source of the jamming to a spot several miles outside of Havana. The location identified was the Cuban military intelligence's Bejucal Signals Intelligence site, which intercepts and jams radio and television signals with equal ease. NITV first broadcast from its Los Angeles-based station in March 2000. However, Iran promptly jammed the Hot Bird 5 satellite in its static orbit over France. NITV and other broadcasters then moved to Telstar 12, because its stationary orbit over the mid-Atlantic placed it outside the range of Iran's jamming stations. However, the move placed NITV within range of Cuba, the only nation in the Western Hemisphere that jams foreign broadcasts. Worldwide, only seven nations engage in such illegal jamming.

Havana had demonstrated Tehran's importance in May 2001 when Fidel Castro visited Iran. Cuba's ambassador to Tehran, career DI officer Darío Urra Torriente, coordinated and oversaw all aspects of Castro's meetings with Iran's leaders. If history is any example, the focus of the conference was economic and political issues, as well as intelligence collaboration. Urra's experience in the Arab world dates back to the early 1960s, when he served in Algiers. During that tour, he assisted in Algeria's covert shipments of weaponry to Venezuelan revolutionaries.

Chris Simmons, a career counterintelligence officer, is an expert on Cuban intelligence.

<http://www.miamiherald.com/851/story/291497.html>

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Christian Science Monitor
November 1, 2007

Middle East racing to nuclear power

Shiite Iran's ambitions have spurred 13 Sunni states to declare atomic energy aims this year.

By Dan Murphy | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
Cairo

This week Egypt became the 13th Middle Eastern country in the past year to say it wants nuclear power, intensifying an atomic race spurred largely by Iran's nuclear agenda, which many in the region and the West claim is cover for a weapons program.

Experts say the nuclear ambitions of majority Sunni Muslim states such as Libya, Jordan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia are reactions to Shiite Iran's high-profile nuclear bid, seen as linked with Tehran's campaign for greater influence and prestige throughout the Middle East.

"To have 13 states in the region say they're interested in nuclear power over the course of a year certainly catches the eye," says Mark Fitzpatrick, a former senior nonproliferation official in the US State Department who is now a fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. "The Iranian angle is the reason."

But economics are also behind this new push to explore nuclear power, at least for some of the aspirants. Egypt's oil reserves are dwindling, Jordan has no natural resources to speak of at all, and power from oil and gas has grown much more expensive for everyone. Though the day has not arrived, it's conceivable that nuclear power will be a cheaper option than traditional plants.

But analysts say the driver is Iran, which appears to be moving ahead with its nuclear program despite sanctions and threats of possible military action by the US. The Gulf Cooperation Council, a group of Saudi Arabia and the five Arab states that border the Persian Gulf, reversed a longstanding opposition to nuclear power last year.

As the closest US allies in the region and sitting on vast oil wealth, these states had said they saw no need for nuclear energy. But Fitzpatrick, as well as other analysts, say these countries now see their own declarations of nuclear intent as a way to contain Iran's influence. At least, experts say, it signals to the US how alarmed they are by a nuclear Iran.

"The rules have changed on the nuclear subject throughout the whole region," Jordan's King Abdullah, another US ally, told Israel's Haaretz newspaper early this year. "Where I think Jordan was saying, 'We'd like to have a nuclear-free zone in the area,' ... [now] everybody's going for nuclear programs."

Though the US has been vociferous in its opposition to Iran's nuclear bid, particularly since the country says it's determined to establish its own nuclear fuel cycle, which would dramatically increase its ability to build a nuclear bomb, it has generally been tolerant of the nuclear ambitions of its friends in the region.

"Those states that want to pursue peaceful nuclear energy ... [are] not a problem for us," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in response to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's announcement on Monday. Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington and a former Defense Department official focused on containing the spread of nuclear weapons, says he finds that hands-off approach of the Bush administration alarming.

"I think we're trying to put out a fire of proliferation with a bucket of kerosene," he says. He said he recently spoke with a senior administration official on the matter, who argued that it was better for the US to cooperate with Egypt and other countries since, in the official's view, nuclear power in these countries is "inevitable" and it's better to be in a position to influence their choices and monitor the process.

Egypt has had an on-again, off-again nuclear program since the 1950s. In the 1960s, Egypt threatened to develop a bomb largely out of anger over Israel's nuclear pursuit. Under Mr. Mubarak, who has ruled since 1981, the country has been consistent in saying it does not want nuclear weapons, and Egypt has been at the forefront of diplomatic efforts to declare the region a nuclear-weapons-free zone – a strategy it uses to target Israel's nuclear weapons.

Today, the country has a 22-megawatt research reactor north of Cairo that was built by an Argentine company and completed in 1997. A drive to develop a power plant in the 1980s stalled after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Russia.

In a nationally televised speech Monday, Mubarak said nuclear power is an "integral part of Egypt's national security" while also promising that the country would not seek the bomb. Other Egyptian officials say the country is planning on having a working reactor within a decade, though analysts say that's an optimistic time line.

Egypt's nuclear plans have been reinvigorated in recent years, with Mubarak's son, Gamal, widely seen in Egypt as his father's favored successor, calling for the building of a reactor. Mubarak discussed nuclear power cooperation on state visits to Russia and China last year.

"They feel politically threatened by Iran's nuclear program, they've pointed out rightly that Israel [hasn't been] a member of [nonproliferation] treaties for many years," says Jon Wolfsthal, a nonproliferation expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "Of course there is economic logic: If they can sell whatever oil they have for \$93 a barrel instead of using it, that's attractive ... but it shouldn't be assumed that it's all benign." For Egypt, the allure of nuclear power is apparent. Its oil consumption is growing and electricity demand is growing at about 7 percent a year.

"Egypt can absolutely make a legitimate case for nuclear energy," says Mr. Fitzpatrick. "Its reserves are dwindling, it needs the oil and gas for export, and it needs to diversify its energy resources."

Even major oil producers such as Saudi Arabia are, along with Iran, arguing that they need nuclear power. They say it's better to sell their oil than to burn it at home.

But some analysts argue that nuclear power remains an economic loser. Mr. Sokolski says that when state subsidies to nuclear power are removed, nuclear plants are not economically viable. "If it was, private banks would be financing nuclear plants without loan guarantees. They can't do it and make money yet."

Of course whenever the topic of nuclear power comes up, particularly in the Middle East, concerns about the possible spread of nuclear weapons are not far behind. Experts who follow the nuclear weapons question say assurances of only pursuing peaceful objectives, as have been given by all the countries pursuing nuclear power, Iran included, shouldn't be taken at face value.

"Although Egypt does not feel directly threatened by Iran, it does feel its own power and influence in the region threatened by a resurgent nuclear armed Iran," says Fitzpatrick.

"There are a lot of countries in the region who have expressed interest in nuclear power, and I think there are good reasons to be concerned about this interest and the timing of this interest," says Mr. Wolfsthal. "Nuclear power has had economic arguments in its favor for a decade, but the fact is these programs are only coming to a head in light of the Iranian program."

Wolfsthal says the key issues in the coming years will be whether Egypt contracts a turn-key plant from a foreign company – which would minimize the amount of skill and technology transferred to Egyptian engineers – or if it will pursue nuclear partnerships that broaden its knowledge and skills bases.

Will they pursue their own nuclear fuel cycle, which, he says, would make little economic sense and would be a clear "red flag" of intent to develop a weapon, or will they buy nuclear fuel from abroad? "If you are interested in having the capability of building a nuclear weapon, the best way to start is by building up your nuclear power infrastructure," he says. "The same people that help you design and build nuclear reactors have many of the skill sets you will need if you are going to build a nuclear weapon."

Fitzpatrick agrees that if Egypt promises not to develop a nuclear fuel cycle and would agree to more intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, there would be little reason for concern, though he doubts those commitments will be made. "Egypt won't take those steps because it says its hands can't be bound anymore while Israel's hands are unbound. They already resent the nuclear asymmetry with Israel, and a nuclear armed Iran on top of that adds too much for them."

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1101/p01s03-wome.html>

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