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Baltimore Sun
February 21, 2007

Iran Calls On West To Halt Enrichment

Ahmadinejad says Tehran would also stop its program, return to nuclear talks

By Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran--Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday that his country was ready to stop its enrichment program and return to talks provided Western nations also stopped their own.

Ahmadinejad told a crowd of thousands in northern Iran one day ahead of a U.N. Security Council deadline that it was no problem for his country to stop, but that "fair talks" demanded a similar gesture from the West.

"That ... we shut down our nuclear fuel cycle program to let talks begin. It's no problem. But justice demands that those who want to hold talks with us shut down their nuclear fuel cycle program too. Then, we can hold dialogue under a fair atmosphere," Ahmadinejad said.

The White House dismissed Ahmadinejad's call.

"Do you believe that's a serious offer?" White House press secretary Tony Snow asked. "It's pretty clear that the international community has said to the Iranians, 'You can have nuclear power but we don't want you to have the ability to build nuclear weapons.' And that is an offer we continue to make."

The Security Council has set today as a deadline for Iran to stop uranium enrichment or face further economic sanctions.

Iran has long insisted that it will not stop its nuclear activities as a condition for negotiations to start.

"The condition they set for talks is a condition that deprives us of our rights," Ahmadinejad said of the United States and its Western allies. "We have never been after confrontation and tension. We have always been for dialogue but dialogue under fair conditions."

Ahmadinejad's speech was unusually conciliatory, avoiding fiery denunciations of the West.

"We are for talks but they have to be fair negotiations. That means, both sides hold talks under equal conditions," he said.

He added, however, that it was unacceptable for countries to demand that Iran stop its nuclear activities without reciprocity.

"We say, how is it that your [nuclear fuel] production facilities work 24 hours a day, but you feel threatened by our newly established complex and we need to shut it down for talks?" he asked.

Iran has rejected the sanctions as "illegal" and said it would not give up its right under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to enrich uranium and produce nuclear fuel.

The United States and several of its Western allies believe that Iran is using its nuclear program to produce an atomic weapon - charges Iran denies, saying its aim is to generate electricity.

Enriched to a low level, uranium is used to produce nuclear fuel but further enrichment makes it suitable for use in building an atomic bomb.

Ahmadinejad said Iran would not give in to coercion, and warned the U.S. and its allies that they would fail to force it into giving up its nuclear program.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/nationworld/bal-te.iran21feb21.0,2826270.story?coll=bal-nationworld-headlines>

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Los Angeles Times

February 21, 2007

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Safety Alarms Raised At Nuclear Weapons Plant

Federal investigators are looking into deteriorating conditions at the Pantex plant in Texas. Energy Department officials say there's no danger.

By Ralph Vartabedian, Times Staff Writer

AMARILLO, TEXAS — Electrical failures have shut down the plant. The roof has leaked. Decrepit machinery dates back more than 40 years. Safety lapses led inspectors to levy fines twice within two years. And employees, under deadline pressure, complain they are often worked past the point of exhaustion.

If this factory were producing medical devices or refining gasoline, the conditions would be serious enough. But this is where they work on nuclear bombs.

Pantex is the Energy Department's main nuclear weapons factory, a linchpin of the nation's defense for half a century. The nation no longer makes nuclear weapons, so the plant's chief roles are servicing them or dismantling them to meet the terms of disarmament pacts.

On a 25-square-mile swath of the Texas Panhandle, a series of massive white concrete domes mark the places where live nuclear weapons are opened up. The rituals and procedures inside those cells are supposed to be as strict as in any operating room, part of a safety culture that reduces any chance of an accidental nuclear explosion to one in 100 million.

But lately, outside experts are questioning whether safety margins are eroding. Federal investigators are trying to assess the overall safety of the plant, which employs 3,300 people, amid troubling safety snafus and what employees call an atmosphere of intimidation.

Energy Department officials acknowledge that the plant has fallen behind schedule on reliability testing of weapons. Long delays have occurred in decommissioning thousands of surplus warheads. They also concede the plant has maintenance problems and has violated safety procedures. But they insist there is virtually no danger of a conventional or nuclear explosion.

"Pantex is safe, no doubt," said Marty Schoenbauer, the acting chief of the Energy Department's nuclear weapons program.

Safety has improved in recent years, he said, thanks to better procedures. But outside experts, union officials and watchdog groups say the opposite is true — that safety has regressed since 2000 as the most knowledgeable senior safety experts of the Cold War era retire and the plant's condition deteriorates. Energy Department Inspector General Gregory H. Friedman is investigating safety conditions at Pantex.

"You can't run a plant on glittering platitudes and generalities and call that a safety program," said Bob Alvarez, a former deputy assistant secretary of Energy and now a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington think tank. "A nuclear detonation accident is a low probability, but it is not incredible."

The backdrop to problems at Pantex is a growing concern that the Energy Department has mismanaged the nuclear weapons program. Last year, the Defense Department bluntly said that it had lost confidence in the Energy Department, Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman has acknowledged.

"We have constraints," Bodman said in an interview, conceding the department hasn't met all of its commitments to the Pentagon. Last month, he fired the head of the nuclear weapons administration.

Conditions at Pantex began deteriorating at the end of the Cold War in 1989, when federal managers started starving the plant of funds. Billions of dollars were instead funneled into nuclear weapons laboratories, giving scientists new supercomputer centers, powerful lasers and physics instruments.

By about 2000, the leaks in Pantex's roof were so bad that workers had to cover bombs with plastic when it rained. In summer 2004, a power overload tripped transformers, causing a plant-wide blackout. Last July, another electrical failure occurred when rats gnawed through wiring, according to weekly safety reports. And in August, a storm swept over the plant that left standing puddles in nuclear production areas.

Although such conditions don't necessarily lead to accidents, the Energy Department has levied fines totaling nearly \$234,000 against the contractor that operates Pantex, BWX Technologies Inc., for safety violations.

In one case, involving the disassembly of a missile warhead, technicians improperly used red vinyl tape to secure a crack in the high explosives surrounding the plutonium sphere of the hydrogen bomb. The use of the tape itself was not faulted, but technicians misread engineering instructions and caused an even bigger crack.

Federal safety inspectors found that the flawed operation "increased the opportunities for dropping all or part of the explosive during handling and hence increased the potential for a violent reaction," a finding that ran against assurances such a detonation was virtually impossible.

In the second case, technicians were extracting an assembly of high explosives and plutonium from the casing of a different missile warhead for servicing. Using a jackscrew to apply several thousand pounds of force to the explosives, technicians exceeded the allowable loads and over a three-day period violated strict safety protocols.

Dan Swaim, BWX Technologies president at Pantex, acknowledged that both incidents broke safety rules and were unacceptable, but he said there was no risk of a disaster.

"No nuclear yield was possible," Swaim said, asserting the company maintains huge safety margins that preclude any potential for a conventional or nuclear explosion. "As a guy who works here every day, I want it to be darn safe."

The problems at Pantex came to light last fall after Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project on Government Oversight, a Washington watchdog group, wrote two letters to Bodman complaining about safety. The group has cited a lengthy report in 2000 by former Energy Department safety expert Frank Rowsome, who said that a detonation caused by lightning strikes, solvent fires or other incidents at Pantex was more probable than the Energy Department was admitting.

In an interview, Rowsome, who retired in 2004, said he did not want to alarm the public, but he believed Energy Department officials were so "overly confident" and "complacent" about safety that they were not alert to deteriorating safety conditions.

Where some see problems, others see progress. Last month, Pantex finally began overhauling the B83, a nuclear bomb designed to drop from a plane, after an 18-month delay triggered when scientists discovered potentially dangerous static electricity in work cells. Schoenbauer said the delay showed how far the Energy Department would go to protect safety. Critics say it shows that hidden safety problems can still exist.

Meanwhile, Pantex also has fallen behind schedule in performing crucial surveillance tests required by laboratory scientists to certify the reliability of the bombs, Schoenbauer acknowledged. "That backlog has not affected the lab's ability to certify weapons," he said.

But Ralph Levine, who once ran the Energy Department's nuclear weapons surveillance testing, wrote a letter in 2005 asserting the backlog would allow defects in nuclear weapons to go undetected for years. As a result, he said, Energy officials removed him as manager of the program, and he retired last year.

John Duncan, who until four years ago headed surveillance testing at Pantex for Sandia National Laboratory, agreed that testing problems at Pantex are undermining confidence in the stockpile. Even today, the certifications of nuclear weapons are being made with less certainty than scientists should have, Duncan and Levine said.

"I knew we were in trouble when I started attending meetings in Washington and was told to work better, faster, cheaper," said Duncan. "They started sending people to the plant with little weapons experience." The Energy Department confirmed Friday it planned to reduce the number of annual surveillance tests, saying the plan was better suited to an aging bomb stockpile. But Duncan said this would further erode the reliability of the weapons.

A senior federal manager at Energy Department headquarters, speaking without attribution because the interview was not authorized, endorses those concerns.

"The delays in testing and lack of resources are so significant," he acknowledged. "The real question is when the laboratories can no longer certify the reliability of the stockpile."

The workload at Pantex is likely to grow even more onerous in coming years.

Under the Moscow Treaty, the U.S. needs to get rid of about 4,000 surplus nuclear warheads. At current rates, that could take Pantex until 2050, said Harvard University nuclear weapons expert Matthew Bunn. Though there is no firm deadline, that pace is unacceptable to arms control experts, Bunn said.

The Bush administration has ordered the plant to increase dismantlements by 50% this year.

Another task looming for Pantex is modernizing the W76 missile warhead used on the Trident submarine. Hundreds of W76 warheads will have to be disassembled and rebuilt with new parts. Swaim said the W76 program would begin on schedule this year.

Pantex — named for the panhandle of Texas — has a largely blue-collar culture. The people who actually touch the weapons are known as "production technicians." They earn about \$24 per hour. Engineers average \$84,000 per year. Though the jobs are sought after in Amarillo, an anonymous letter surfaced in November alleging that the plant was in serious disrepair, BWX Technologies management was letting safety slip and employees were forced to work more than 80 hours a week in some cases.

The stress of working with nuclear weapons has been exacerbated by an abusive management, said Henry Bagwell, the former chief of the Metals Trade Council, the principal union at the plant. "They treat people badly," said Bagwell, who left last year after 24 years at the plant.

Bagwell said that when he attempted to raise a health and safety problem involving toxic beryllium dust in 2003, he was demoted from X-ray technician to janitor.

"It sent a message," Bagwell said. "It was a public humiliation. Safety seriously took a back seat."

Swaim takes sharp exception to allegations that the roof leaks, labor relations are strained or that severe amounts of overtime are being forced on workers. After the letter surfaced, Swaim said an audit showed overtime averaged just 15% over the normal 40-hour work week, though some individuals racked up more.

"I told my guys no more than 72 hours a week," he said.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-pantex21feb21,1,1676623.story?coll=la-headlines-nation>

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New York Times

February 22, 2007

Iraq Insurgents Employ Chlorine in Bomb Attacks

By Damien Cave and Ahmad Fadam

BAGHDAD, Feb. 21 — A truck bomb that combined explosives with chlorine gas blew up in southern Baghdad on Wednesday, and officials said it might represent a new and deadly tactic by insurgents against Iraqi civilians.

It was at least the third truck bomb in a month to employ chlorine, a greenish gas also used in World War I, which burns the skin and can be fatal after only a few concentrated breaths. The bomb killed at least two people and wounded 32 others, many of them sent to hospitals coughing and wheezing, police and medical officials said.

Iraqi and American officials said the use of chlorine seemed aimed at bringing a new level of fear and havoc to Iraq as a new security plan for Baghdad takes shape.

Lt. Col. Christopher Garver, an American military spokesman, said the attacks highlighted the fluidity of insurgent tactics in Iraq, dominated by militant groups that often notice and repeat attacks that attract the most attention and cause the most suffering.

Insurgents have shifted tactics to focus on helicopters, and on Wednesday one group forced down an American Black Hawk helicopter, the eighth such incident since Jan. 20. Roadside bombs have been adapted to punch through heavily armored Humvees. Attacks on Americans also now include coordinated assaults from multiple locations, with a mix of weapons and in at least one case, counterfeit American uniforms and vehicles.

"The enemy is adaptive," Colonel Garver said. "The enemy wants to win."

The Black Hawk attacked on Wednesday was forced into a "hard landing" after taking fire from heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades in Diyala Province, north of Baghdad, the United States military said. There

were no injuries. A Sunni insurgent group, the Mujahedeen Army, claimed responsibility for the attack in an Internet posting, according to the SITE Institute, which tracks postings by insurgent groups.

The bombing involving chlorine gas on Wednesday followed an explosion on Tuesday north of Baghdad of a tanker filled with chlorine that had been rigged to explode, killing nine people and wounding 148, including 42 women and 52 children. At least one other attack with chlorine took place on Jan. 28, according to the American military's statements. Sixteen people were killed in that attack, in the Sunni-dominated Anbar Province, when a dump truck with explosives and a chlorine tank blew up in Ramadi.

The attacks seem to have been poorly executed, burning the chemical agent rather than dispersing it, but more sophisticated weapons involving chlorine could injure hundreds and cause mass panic.

Though it is widely used in water purification and sewage treatment, chlorine is dangerous because it reacts with water in moist tissue, such as eyes and the respiratory tract, to create acid, which essentially burns tissue. A few breaths of air containing chlorine at a thousand parts per million can be lethal.

Nine people were killed and 250 injured in 2005 after a train crash in South Carolina in which 60 tons of liquefied chlorine was released — about six times more than what is contained in a home heating fuel truck like the one used in the attack on Tuesday.

Exposures at far lower concentrations, down to two parts per million, cause coughing, shortness of breath, chest pain, burning in the throat, nose and eyes, nausea and swelling of the lungs.

A few hours after the attack, American Humvees and a military vehicle with a nozzle that appeared to be testing the air encircled the scene. Soldiers were not wearing masks, but officials at Yarmouk hospital said they had determined through interviews and tests that chlorine was used in the attack.

Brig. Qasim Atta, an Iraqi government spokesman for the new Baghdad security plan, described chlorine attacks as a “filthy way” to harm vulnerable Iraqis.

Colonel Garver said that the chemical attacks could soon appear again. “It’s no surprise that anti-Iraqi forces or terrorists or whoever is doing this are trying to replicate this kind of attack,” he said. “They perceive that it’s working.”

The attacks on Tuesday and Wednesday also indicated that the Baghdad security plan had pushed the violence beyond the city’s central neighborhoods, the focus of the new plan.

Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell IV, a United States military spokesman in Baghdad, said that the “belt around Baghdad” had experienced an increase in attacks as Iraqi and American forces concentrated on neighborhoods within. At a briefing in the Green Zone, he said that top commanders were considering assigning at least one brigade to the ring around the city, and perhaps another to Diyala Province, which has been the site of vicious battles between Sunni insurgents and American and Iraqi troops.

The witnesses to the helicopter crash, also in Diyala, said that three helicopters, including a double-rotor Chinook, were flying at tree level when gunmen began firing antiaircraft machine guns from an area near an oil pipeline. A resident who would give his name only as Ali said the back of one helicopter burst into flames, leading the aircraft to turn sideways and plunge to the ground. Two other witnesses said they saw fire coming from the helicopter as it crashed around 1 p.m.

Violence broke out on Wednesday in the southern Shiite holy city of Najaf, when a suicide car bomber detonated as Iraqi security forces checked the car for weapons at a checkpoint into the center of city. The explosion occurred about a half a mile from the Imam Ali mosque, one of Shiite Islam’s holiest shrines, and killed at least 11 people, the police said. Another 34 were wounded.

The American military also said a soldier had been killed by gunfire in a northern neighborhood of Baghdad and a marine had died from combat in Anbar Province, where American troops were battling Sunni insurgents. Both died Tuesday.

Meanwhile, despite the increased military effort, 20 bodies were found Wednesday in the capital, an Interior Ministry official said. In addition to the chlorine attack, four bombs ripped through areas of the city, killing at least six people, while mortar shells rained down on a Sunni neighborhood of western Baghdad, leaving three people dead.

The deadliest attack came about 5:30 p.m., when an abandoned car exploded in Sadr City, the largest Shiite area of the capital, killing at least four people, witnesses said.

Fatma al-Saiedi, 35, who was wounded in the explosion, said the attacks were a result of the new plan, which has replaced the Mahdi Army, a Shiite militia, with what she and some other residents say are incompetent Iraqi policemen and soldiers.

“We trusted the Mahdi Army,” she said. “The Americans have arrested so many of them, and now this happens — every day, another car bomb. We expect there to be more of them.”

Reporting was contributed by Khalid al-Ansary, Hosham Hussein and Qais Mizher from Baghdad; an Iraqi employee of The New York Times from Najaf; and Craig Hunter from New York.

Washington Post
February 22, 2007
Pg. 14

Iran Continues Nuclear Work Despite Deadline, Sanction Threat

By Dafna Linzer and Colum Lynch, Washington Post Staff Writers

Despite the threat of new sanctions, Iran is advancing work at its largest nuclear facility and has informed international inspectors in writing that it will not comply with a U.N. order to suspend the program, according to U.S. and European diplomats familiar with the inspectors' latest findings.

The U.N. Security Council on Dec. 23 set a 60-day deadline for the Tehran government to halt its nuclear work. Since then, though, Iran has installed nearly 400 centrifuges, in two separate lines, at its uranium-enrichment facility in the town of Natanz, according to several officials who agreed, on the condition of anonymity, to discuss details from the inspectors' report, which is due today.

The report to the Security Council will confirm, the officials said, that Iran is flouting the council's resolution and moving ahead with its efforts to enrich uranium.

U.S., British and French officials said they will respond to Iran's defiance by pressing for additional economic sanctions, including an enforced travel ban on senior Iranian officials, asset freezes, and an end to government-backed loans and credits. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is scheduled to meet today in Berlin with German, Russian and European colleagues to discuss the possibility of imposing those new sanctions.

"The Iranians have unfortunately not acceded to the international community's demands, and we will have to consult. We will have to decide how to move forward," she told reporters yesterday.

Rice said talks with Iran were possible on the condition that it suspend its nuclear program first.

But diplomats in Washington and at the United Nations acknowledged yesterday that they expect weeks of struggle with Russia, China and members of the European Union, all of which are ready to reopen talks with Iran even if it does not first halt the nuclear program.

"If the intention is to punish the Iranians," said one Chinese diplomat, the Security Council is in for a "long negotiating process."

A senior European diplomat said it is not a foregone conclusion that "we will go down the sanctions lane," adding: "There are quite a number of European Union countries who believe we should go easy because there seems to be an opening on the Iranian side."

The Bush administration has been trying for years to roll back Iran's nuclear advances, choosing sanctions and attempted isolation rather than engaging in direct talks with Tehran. But even with Iran clearly defying a Security Council resolution, other countries are making their own diplomatic gestures in the hopes of curtailing another Middle East crisis.

Senior diplomats from Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Saudi Arabia and China, as well as Mohamed ElBaradei, the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, have all reached out to Iran's senior negotiator, Ali Larijani, in the past two weeks as the deadline for Iranian compliance approached.

The diplomatic impasse dampened the prospects for a swift Security Council reaction to Iran's missed deadline. Ambassador Peter Burian of Slovakia, the council's current president, said it is unlikely that the body will discuss the issue this week.

Other diplomats said that they are waiting for the results of a meeting, expected in the next 10 days, among diplomats from Russia, China, the United States, France, Britain and Germany.

Iran has said repeatedly that it wants to return to negotiations with Europe and Russia and even hold talks with the United States, but that it would not halt its nuclear program as a precondition. Larijani reiterated to ElBaradei on Tuesday that Iran is ready to commit to a three-month freeze, but only once talks resumed, officials with direct knowledge of their meeting said. Iran says that its nuclear program, which began in secret in 1987, is for the production of energy and not weapons and that the nation is within its rights, as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to develop nuclear fuel.

Yesterday, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said the nuclear dispute "has to be decided peacefully with the United States." At the same time, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said his country will never give up its nuclear program. "Obtaining this technology is very important for our country's development and honor," he said. Iranian officials sent a letter Monday to inspectors at the IAEA, announcing that they would not comply with the Security Council deadline and that their work at Natanz would continue, according to diplomats in Vienna, where the IAEA is based.

The Security Council has repeatedly pressed Iran since March to cease its uranium-enrichment activities. In December, the 15 nations voted to restrict Iran's trade in sensitive nuclear materials and to freeze the assets of 22 Iranian officials and institutions linked to the country's most controversial nuclear activities.

ElBaradei said in interviews published yesterday that Iran could be five to six years away from acquiring the capability to make a nuclear weapon. U.S. intelligence officials have estimated that Iran is five to 10 years away. *Lynch reported from the United Nations.*

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/21/AR2007022101819.html>

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www.nytimes.com

U.S. Tries to Ease Concerns in Russia on Antimissile Plan

By THOM SHANKER

Published: February 22, 2007

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — Bush administration officials tried Wednesday to tamp down Russian concerns, voiced in strikingly harsh terms, over American plans to base missile defenses in Eastern Europe.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the missile defense proposal, which calls for deploying 10 interceptors in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic, was solely intended to counter the possible development of long-range Iranian missiles.

“I think everybody understands that with a growing Iranian missile threat, which is quite pronounced, that there need to be ways to deal with that problem,” she said, adding that the system would not “diminish Russia’s deterrent of thousands of warheads.”

The debate escalated this week when the Russian missile commander, Gen. Nikolai Y. Solovtsov, threatened to aim Russian weapons at states in Eastern Europe that might join the program.

“If the government of Poland, the Czech Republic and other countries make this decision — and I think mutual consultations that have been held and will be held will allow avoiding this — the strategic missile troops will be able to have those facilities as targets,” he said.

And on Wednesday, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, who has a prickly relationship at best with Ms. Rice, was quoted in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the Russian state newspaper, wholly contradicting the American position. “We must acknowledge that these objects are fully suitable to intercept missiles fired from Russian territory,” he said.

His colleague, the departing Russian defense minister, Sergei B. Ivanov, has said that Russia could easily overwhelm the American defenses with a far cheaper system of countermeasures to blind or confuse an antimissile system.

During a stopover in Brussels on Wednesday on his way to Moscow, President Bush’s national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley, said a missile defense system against Iran “is a reasonable thing to do, it’s something Europe ought to be interested in, it’s something that Russia ought to be interested in.” Iran might even decide not to try to build long-range missiles once the system was in place, he suggested.

Ambassador Victoria Nuland, the United States representative to NATO, said Russia had no cause to express surprise, as representatives from Moscow and the European allies were briefed regularly on the project over the past year.

In November, the NATO-Russia Council received what Ms. Nuland called “a full technical briefing” from Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering III, director of the Missile Defense Agency, and Eric S. Edelman, the under secretary of defense for policy.

But the administration is concerned about growing criticism of the program. Officials scheduled a briefing by General Obering on Thursday for foreign reporters based in Washington. Joining him will be Daniel Fried, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs.

The antimissile interceptors, General Obering said last month, “are geared toward and are directed toward rogue nation capabilities, obviously not sophisticated ballistic missile fleets such as the Russians have.” He said they “cannot physically catch the Russian ICBMs even if we were trying to target those missiles” because of the short distances and flight times from Russian silos in relation to Poland.

The debate began this month with a caustic speech by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who told an audience in Munich that the United States was provoking a new nuclear arms race. He also criticized the expansion of NATO. Senior Bush administration officials attending the security conference in Munich and those back in Washington conferred on the proper response, and they decided to push back — but only gently.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates rewrote his own speech, delivered a day after Mr. Putin's, to say that the Russian president's comments brought a certain nostalgia for a simpler time, but that "one cold war was quite enough."

Angela E. Stent, director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University, said the Bush administration had "already been reassessing our policy toward Russia, as we have understood at least since January of 2006 or even before that there is a newly self-confident Russia, a Russia that is awash in petrodollars and a Russia that really feels it can say no and pursue its own interests."

Ms. Stent said the Bush administration was well aware that the Russian agenda on Syria, Hamas, Venezuela and a number of issues parted with Washington's. But she said it was worth seeking cooperation, in particular on counterterrorism.

Before he left for Moscow, Mr. Hadley said there were "a number of areas where Russia and the United States and Europe can cooperate productively, where we have common interests, where we can cooperate and are cooperating." These include terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

But the administration is pressing Moscow on other issues of concern, including its use of its energy resources as a political tool, its crackdown on civil liberties and press freedoms and its pressure on Russia's southern neighbors, in particular Georgia.

Helene Cooper contributed reporting from Berlin, and Michael Schwartz from Moscow.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/22/world/europe/22policy.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin

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New York Times
February 23, 2007
Pg. 1

Iran Expanding Nuclear Effort, Agency Reports

By David E. Sanger and William J. Broad

WASHINGTON, Feb. 22 — In open defiance of the United Nations, Iran is steadily expanding its efforts to enrich uranium, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported Thursday. In response, the Bush administration immediately pressed for more severe sanctions against the country, at a moment of greatly increased tensions between Washington and Tehran.

In a mild surprise to outside experts, the nuclear agency reported that Iran was now operating or about to switch on roughly 1,000 centrifuges, the high-speed devices that enrich uranium, at its nuclear facility at Natanz.

"They are very serious," said David Albright, a former inspector who is now president of the Institute for Science and International Security, a private nuclear study group. "They are installing faster than was commonly expected." Coming on the heels of the Bush administration's accusations that Iran's Quds Force is sending deadly bombs and other weapons into Iraq, the report heightens what has become a growing confrontation.

Since the last energy agency assessment of Iran's progress, President Bush has ordered a second aircraft carrier group into waters in striking distance of Iran, an unobvious reminder that, if diplomacy fails, Mr. Bush could order a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. But senior administration officials have insisted in recent days that the show of military force is intended only to remind Iran of Washington's options, and they have dismissed the idea that Mr. Bush is considering an attack.

On Thursday, administration officials said they hoped to use the agency's conclusions to return to the Security Council for approval of deeper sanctions, and they said the United States would work outside the Council to persuade banks around the world to cut off more lending and export credits to Iran, in hopes of further damaging its oil infrastructure. Under Secretary of State R. Nicholas Burns will go to London on Monday to begin that process, meeting with the four other permanent members of the Security Council and Germany to talk about tougher sanctions. While Russia and China agreed to the December resolution, which required the inspectors to report back on Iran's compliance in 60 days, they indicated at the time that they were unwilling to increase the penalties.

The report appeared to confirm that the Iranian government was somewhat behind schedule in its nuclear ambitions: it boasted a year ago of plans to have roughly 3,000 centrifuges running by about now. But the 1,000 that it has nearly ready to run is still more than most outside experts believed it could install. If the country could operate 3,000 centrifuges continuously for a year, it could produce about one weapon's worth of highly enriched uranium.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel said Thursday that even though the Iranians were not as far along as they would like to be, they were still far closer to learning how to make bomb-grade uranium than Israel was comfortable with. He dodged questions about at what point Israel might lean toward military action, a step American officials have said that they are trying to discourage.

“We’re a long way from that,” one senior administration official said earlier this week. “We want to make sure that the Israelis are, too.” He said he had no indication that Israel was planning unilateral action.

The report comes at a time of debate within the administration over whether and how to find a way to negotiate with Iran without violating Mr. Bush’s stricture that the country must first suspend its enrichment work. Officials say they are trying to exploit fissures in Iranian society, as some Iranian groups are beginning to question whether the hard-line position taken by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and some of the country’s ruling ayatollahs is worth the cost in sanctions and isolation.

“There are people in Iran who recognize that the path that they’re on is not a useful path, not a constructive path,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in Berlin before the release of the report. She said if Iran suspended enrichment, “We could begin negotiations on whatever they would like to talk about.”

On Thursday, Mr. Burns said in an interview that he believed the Security Council resolution in December was having an effect. “We did not fully anticipate the strong impact that it would have,” he said. “It has divided the government in Tehran and frankly knocked them off stride.”

But Iran’s leaders have continued to reject Mr. Bush’s condition for talks — a suspension of nuclear activity — which would essentially undercut their only real leverage in negotiations. Unlike North Korea, which agreed in principle in recent days to freeze its production of new nuclear material, Iran is not believed to possess nuclear weapons, meaning that the uranium enrichment is its main bargaining chip.

Mr. Bush and Ms. Rice are also concerned about losing leverage, senior officials say. With oil at \$60 a barrel, they are concerned that no sanctions can truly harm Iran. And negotiating while Iran expands its enrichment capacity, they fear, would mean that as negotiations dragged on, Iran would get closer to being able to produce a nuclear weapon.

In its December resolution, the Security Council gave Iran 60 days to both suspend its operations and answer a series of questions. Open issues, it said, included research on high explosives, which are necessary to detonate an atom bomb, as well as the design of a missile warhead.

“Without such cooperation and transparency,” the report said, “the agency will not be able to provide assurances about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran or about the exclusively peaceful nature of that program.”

Moreover, the Iranians have sharply restricted the access of inspectors to many of the sites they once had freedom to visit. Inspectors were allowed several recent visits to the nuclear complex at Natanz, and their report reflected greater-than-expected progress there. In addition to the 362 centrifuges in its pilot plant there, Iran in recent months has been installing an additional 656 machines in two cavernous underground halls at the complex. Of those, inspectors say, roughly half are at the final stage of testing before the introduction of uranium, and the other half were “in the final stages of installation.”

The report said that between Nov. 2 and Feb. 17, Iranian crews fed 145 pounds of uranium into the pilot plant for enrichment. That is more than they had done in previous intervals. But their effort still produced only about 15 pounds of low-enriched uranium — too little for anything but experimental analysis.

The inspectors expected that effort to expand quickly, saying that Iran planned to begin feeding uranium into the new centrifuges in the big halls by the end of this month, and to continue installing more centrifuges there so that, by May, the total number of operating machines would come to 3,000.

“They’re forging ahead,” said a European diplomat who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of protocol. “They’re not moving at a huge pace but they’re moving.”

“It’s fairly clear,” the diplomat added, “that Iran still has not addressed the outstanding issues — the scope and intent of the program.”

The Iranians say the cavernous underground halls will eventually hold 54,000 centrifuges, allowing the enrichment of uranium by the ton for reactor fuel rods — or, if the Bush administration’s fears come true, nuclear arms.

The atomic agency in its report said Iran had already moved into the cavernous halls nearly 10 tons of unenriched uranium — enough, nuclear experts said, to make at least one atom bomb. In all, at its sprawling plant at Isfahan, Iran has produced some 200 tons of uranium now ready for enrichment at Natanz. If turned into weapons-grade uranium, that would be enough for more than a dozen nuclear weapons.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html>

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Washington Post

February 23, 2007

Pg. 1

Rice Warns Iran It Risks Further U.N. Sanctions

Report Finds Continued Nuclear Defiance

By Colum Lynch and Dafna Linzer, Washington Post Staff Writers

UNITED NATIONS, Feb. 22 -- Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned Iran on Thursday that it will face further punishment and isolation if it forges ahead with efforts to develop a uranium-enrichment program, but she said the United States and other powers are prepared to restart talks aimed at ending the standoff if Iran suspends its most controversial nuclear activities.

The remarks came hours after the International Atomic Energy Agency issued a report saying Iran has defied yet another U.N. Security Council demand to halt its most sensitive nuclear activities. R. Nicholas Burns, undersecretary of state for political affairs, plans to travel to London on Monday to press Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany to slap additional penalties on Iran.

"We have the common goal to encourage Iran back to the bargaining table," Rice said after a meeting in Berlin with her counterparts from Russia, Germany and the European Union. "The hope is that the sanctions show the Iranians the isolation that they are enduring, that isolation is likely to increase over time and that it is time to take a different course."

The IAEA report confirmed that Iran has continued to operate an experimental uranium-enrichment program and that it has advanced its efforts to produce an industrial-scale facility that could potentially produce enough highly enriched uranium to make as many as two bombs a year. Iran says it has no intention of producing bomb-grade uranium and will use the facility to produce nuclear fuel for energy.

A senior Iranian official said that the council's demand to suspend its nuclear activities "could not be accepted by Iran" because it would strip Tehran of its right, under the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty, to operate a civilian nuclear energy program. "This report shows that the best way to resolve this international issue is to return to the negotiating table and reach a broad agreement," said the official, Mohammad Saeedi, deputy head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, according to Reuters.

Russia, China and several European countries have become increasingly uncomfortable with the Bush administration's positions on Iran as tensions between Tehran and Washington have risen in recent months. Bush recently authorized the U.S. military to capture or kill Iranian intelligence and paramilitary agents in Iraq; the administration has said such agents are involved in attacks against U.S. military forces. The Pentagon has sent two carriers to sit off the Iranian coast in the Persian Gulf, which some allies have interpreted as preparation for a possible military strike.

Those concerns have prompted renewed calls for direct dialogue with Iran. German, Swiss, Russian, Chinese, Saudi and IAEA officials have all reached out to Iran in recent weeks in the hopes of restarting talks even if Iran continues to defy the Security Council.

Several diplomats said there is a possibility that the E.U.'s top diplomat, Javier Solana, will meet next week with Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani to assemble a list of guiding principles for future negotiations.

U.S. and European diplomats said that they are pursuing a "dual track" diplomatic strategy -- pressing simultaneously for additional sanctions and renewed negotiations with Tehran -- but remained divided over how tough new sanctions should be.

The United States, Britain and France favor imposing a series of additional penalties against Iran, including a mandatory travel ban and additional asset freezes against some Iranian officials linked to the country's most sensitive nuclear programs. They also support measures including a ban on export credits. "We want to do it as soon as possible and to avoid the wrangling of last time. But we've got to get tougher sanctions than we have at the moment if we want real impact, and we're very realistic about how difficult that may be," a senior European official said.

A senior U.S. official said the United States is willing to forgo a tough resolution in exchange for the Security Council moving quickly to a unified agreement to raise the political stakes for Iran while avoiding a fight with the Russians.

But other European powers that conduct billions of dollars in trade with Iran, including Germany and Italy, have resisted stringent economic sanctions that would harm their commercial interests.

Russia and China are also resisting a tough reaction. Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, said, "We should not lose sight of the goal, . . . to accomplish a political outcome of this problem."

Thursday's six-page report concluded that "Iran has not suspended its enrichment related activities." The report provided no evidence that Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons, as President Bush asserts, but inspectors said Iran's lack of voluntary cooperation with its investigation made it impossible to rule out that such efforts were underway.

The report detailed progress Iran has made in the past two months installing several hundred centrifuges for industrial-scale enrichment at its largest nuclear facility in the town of Natanz. The Iranians have been enriching low

levels of uranium suitable for a nuclear energy program, not bombs, in other centrifuges set up more than a year ago at Natanz's research center.

IAEA inspectors said Iran had not provided any new information on the history of its nuclear program, which began in secret in 1987. Inspectors also received no answers to questions raised by documents obtained by U.S. intelligence in 2004 that suggest Iran was trying to develop a missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and was considering plans for a second uranium-conversion facility.

Despite the lack of information in the report, no official, in Washington or Europe, suggested that Iran's current work meant it will acquire nuclear weapons in the near future.

"Their nuclear program is not forging ahead," said a senior European diplomat. "Some of that is a result of the sanctions and the international pressure on them and some of it is because of their own technical difficulties in putting the program together."

Staff writers Glenn Kessler and Karen DeYoung contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/22/AR2007022200849.html>

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New York Times

February 23, 2007

Iraq Rebels Expected To Use More Chlorine Gas In Attacks

By Richard A. Opiel Jr.

BAGHDAD, Feb. 22 — Insurgents are likely to continue combining car bombs with chlorine gas and other chemicals to launch attacks similar to three in recent weeks that spewed chlorine and sickened scores of Iraqis, the military warned Thursday.

American troops raided a car-bomb factory near Falluja and found chlorine cylinders and propane tanks among the bomb components.

The raid late Tuesday in Karma, an insurgent-dominated village between Falluja and Baghdad, led American officials to suggest that insurgents had planned to combine the materials found into a new round of chemical-laden vehicular bombs.

The latest chlorine bombing happened Wednesday in southern Baghdad and killed at least two people and wounded 32 others. Many exhibited symptoms of exposure to chlorine, a greenish gas that burns the skin and can be fatal after a few concentrated, deep breaths.

The Karma site was stocked with "numerous artillery rounds, mortar rounds, bombs, rockets, gutted anti-aircraft shells, a pickup truck and three other vehicles that were already in various stages of preparations as car bombs," said Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, the second-ranking commander in Iraq.

"We also found ingredients to be used to devise or enhance explosives such as fertilizer and chlorine cylinders," the general said.

The general insisted that the recent chlorine attacks did not suggest that the insurgency is "any more capable," but said that militants were trying to "adapt in such ways where they can continue to create instability, and that's what they're doing."

Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell IV told CNN that the troops had found "five complete buildings full of these various types of things," including 65 propane tanks. "What we are seeing is a change in tactics, but the strategy has not changed."

Military officials are also acutely concerned that insurgents have adapted tactics to exploit vulnerabilities in flight patterns of military helicopters, which are expected to fly 400,000 hours this year in Iraq, a 20 percent increase over 2006.

At least eight helicopters have been downed in the last month, the latest on Wednesday when a Black Hawk crash-landed in Diyala Province after coming under fire from heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

No one was wounded in the latest crash.

General Odierno said that in two or three of the helicopter shoot-downs "ambush sites" had been set up by insurgents. "My guess is we have a cell out there that's somewhat effective," he said. He said two suspected of being insurgents, each believed to have played a role in separate helicopter attacks, had been detained in the past week, and one had admitted his involvement.

In Ramadi, the Anbar provincial capital, American forces fought a fierce battle with insurgents that officials at the Ramadi hospital said had left at least 27 Iraqis dead. One of the officials, Dr. Abdullah Salah, said four women and four children were among those killed. Witnesses said at least three houses had been attacked by American aircraft. The marines, who patrol western Iraq, disputed the hospital casualty count, saying that the six-hour fight left 12 insurgents dead and that they had no reports of civilian or American military casualties.

A Marine spokesman, First Lt. Shawn Mercer, said insurgents attacked soldiers with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades Wednesday evening in east Ramadi. The American soldiers fired back at first with small arms and medium machine guns, then with heavy machine guns, a shoulder-fired rocket, and "precision guided munitions."

The Associated Press reported that photographs made available to the news agency showed "the bodies of two small boys wrapped in one blanket, one with a bloody face, the other ashen and with mud on his mouth, his hands crossed on his chest." Other pictures showed four or five bodies covered by blankets, and men searching through rubble. On the heels of another rape allegation that has shaken Iraq's Shiite-dominated government, an Iraqi general in the northern city of Tal Afar told several news agencies that four Iraqi soldiers had been accused of raping a 50-year-old Sunni Turkmen woman about 10 days ago.

Brig. Gen. Nijm Abdullah told The Associated Press that a lieutenant and three enlisted men initially denied the woman's charge, but then confessed after being confronted by the woman.

An official from the Tal Afar hospital said the woman was raped after her husband was jailed by Iraqi soldiers, and she did not come forward until she was encouraged to do so by an official from the main Sunni political bloc.

One soldier from the 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) was killed and three wounded by a roadside bomb attack near Diwaniya early Thursday morning, the military reported.

At least 14 bodies were also discovered throughout the capital on Thursday, an Interior Ministry official said.

Qais Mizher and Khalid al-Ansary contributed reporting from Baghdad, and an Iraqi employee of The New York Times from Mosul, Iraq.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/23/world/middleeast/23iraq.html>

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Washington Times

February 23, 2007

Pg. 13

Nuke Timeline Key To Successful Deal

U.S. aims to avert repeat of '94

By David R. Sands, Washington Times

The top U.S. negotiator on North Korea said yesterday that the United States will insist on strict deadlines to keep a step-by-step deal to end the North's nuclear-weapons programs from unraveling as did a similar deal negotiated under the Clinton administration.

Christopher R. Hill, assistant secretary of state for East Asian Affairs, said North Korea must shut down its nuclear site at Yongbyon and allow United Nations inspectors back into the country by mid-April under the deal struck at the six-party talks in Beijing 10 days ago.

Also by that date, a series of working groups -- including a bilateral one on U.S.-North Korean relations and one on promised food and fuel aid for Pyongyang -- are supposed to be up and running. The U.S. government also has promised to wrap up an 18-month investigation of a Chinese bank that was a crucial conduit for the North's meager hard currency reserves.

"Above all, everyone is agreed that we need to avoid missing deadlines," Mr. Hill told a packed room yesterday in a briefing at the Brookings Institution think tank.

"When you start missing deadline, it's like the theory about a broken window," Mr. Hill said. "If one window isn't repaired, before you know it, you'll have a lot of broken windows and nobody cares."

The agreement was signed by representatives from the United States, North and South Korea, Russia, Japan and China. Beijing hosted the talks and provided crucial behind-the-scenes diplomacy to make the deal, Mr. Hill said. China's decision to back U.N. resolutions condemning Pyongyang for a missile test last summer and a nuclear bomb test in October "really got the attention of North Korea," he added.

U.S. critics of the deal, including former U.N. Ambassador John R. Bolton, have criticized the agreement as a replay of the 1994 Agreed Framework, negotiated by the Clinton administration to head off an earlier North Korean nuclear crisis. Pyongyang proceeded with a secret nuclear-weapons program despite the promises of energy and aid in the 1994 deal.

Mr. Hill said that this time, China and all of the North's neighbors were parties to the deal, making it harder for Pyongyang to walk away. The six-party agreement also is far more ambitious, he said, calling for the eventual elimination of the North's nuclear-weapons programs and normalization of relations with the United States.

But Mr. Hill said he was "not taking a victory lap yet," because the Beijing accord left some major questions unanswered.

Among them: the fate of the North's existing stock of nuclear bombs -- estimated at four to 12 -- and of the 50 kilotons of plutonium Pyongyang is thought to have on hand to make more bombs. The North still has to provide a detailed list of all its nuclear sites that will be dismantled.

The State Department envoy also conceded that major uncertainties remain about the North's plans to use highly enriched uranium to fuel nuclear bombs. The Bush administration cited Pyongyang's admission in 2002 that it had a secret uranium program as a reason to break off the Agreed Framework deal for good.

Pyongyang has secretly bought some equipment consistent with an enriched uranium program, but there are some "considerable production techniques that we're not sure whether they have mastered," Mr. Hill said.

<http://www.washtimes.com/world/20070222-101418-1688r.htm>

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New York Times

February 23, 2007

What Scares Iran's Mullahs?

By Abbas Milani

Stanford, Calif. -- Iran has once again defied the United Nations -- by proceeding with enrichment activities, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported yesterday. And yet, simultaneously, Iranian officials have been sending a very different message — one that has gone largely unremarked but merits close attention.

After a meeting with the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leader's chief foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, declared last week that suspending uranium enrichment is not a red line for the regime — in other words, the mullahs might be ready to agree to some kind of a suspension. Another powerful insider, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, said much the same thing in a different setting, while a third high-ranking official acknowledged that the Islamic Republic is seriously considering a proposal by President Vladimir Putin of Russia to suspend enrichment at least long enough to start serious negotiations with the United Nations.

There have also been indications that the Iranians are willing to accept a compromise plan presented by Mohamed ElBaradei, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency. That plan calls for the suspension of all major enrichment activities but allows the regime to save face by keeping a handful of centrifuges in operation.

The mullahs are keen on damage control on another front as well. After his meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei, Mr. Velayati announced that the Holocaust is a fact of history and chastised those who question its reality. Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, also declared the Holocaust a "historical matter" to be discussed by scholars (and not, he implied, by ignorant politicians). In short, there is a new willingness among the Iranian political elite to avoid the rhetoric of confrontation and to negotiate.

There are three ways to analyze this turn. Advocates of an American invasion of Iran say that last month's strengthening of the American armada in the Persian Gulf has frightened the Iranian regime. What diplomacy could not do for years, a few destroyers did in less than a month. These advocates encourage more of the same, hoping either that the mullahs will accept defeat in the face of an imminent attack, or that a Gulf of Tonkin incident will lead to a full attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

A second camp attacks the build-up of the armada as dangerous saber-rattling at best, and at worst as camouflage for already settled plans to attack Iran's nuclear sites. Such an attack, they say, might provide a much-needed feather for President Bush's empty cap at a time when his Middle East policy has manifestly failed. According to this camp, what changed the minds of Iranian officials was only the United Nations resolution threatening economic sanctions, and the possibility of other resolutions and more serious sanctions.

Both camps are partly right and yet dangerously wrong. There is a third way of looking at the facts.

The mullahs have historically shown an unfailing ability to smell out and, when pragmatic, succumb to credible power in their foes. Indeed, the presence of the American ships has helped encourage them to negotiate. But no less clear is the fact that the mullahs' attitude change began in late December, when the United Nations Security Council finally passed a resolution against the regime in Tehran.

The passage of the resolution hastened the demise of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's confrontational approach to the West. And the falling price of oil, leading to declining revenues for the regime, magnified the resolution's economic impact. Top leaders of the Islamic Republic, from Ayatollah Khamenei to Mr. Rafsanjani, have made it clear that they consider sanctions a serious threat — more serious, according to Mr. Rafsanjani, than the possibility of an invasion.

In other words, what the unilateral and increasingly quixotic American embargo could not do in more than a decade, a limited United Nations resolution has accomplished in less than a month. And the resolution succeeded because few things frighten the mullahs more than the prospect of confronting a united front made up of the European Union, Russia, China and the United States. The resolution was a manifestation of just such a united front.

While the combination of credible force, reduced oil prices and a United Nations resolution has worked to create the most favorable conditions yet for a negotiated solution to the nuclear crisis, any unilateral American attack on Iran is sure to backfire. It will break the international coalition against the Islamic Republic's nuclear adventurism; it will allow China, Russia and even some countries in Europe to legitimately side with the mullahs; it will lead to higher oil prices and an increase in Iranian government revenues; and finally, it will help revive the waning power of the warmongers in Tehran.

Those convinced that only the combination of credible might and diplomatic pressure will work worry rightly that the Bush administration, frustrated by its failures in Iraq and goaded by hawks in Washington, will do to Iran what it did to Iraq. In confronting Saddam Hussein and the threat of his weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration insisted that amassing an armada in the Persian Gulf was necessary to frighten Mr. Hussein into submission. But once the armada was in place, they used it to carry out a long-ago planned invasion of Iraq. Today, many worry that the plans for an invasion of Iran, too, were made long ago, and that the armada is there to make possible either another Gulf of Tonkin resolution or an Iranian act of provocation against American forces, which could then serve as an excuse for an attack on Iran.

War and peace with Iran are both possible today. With prudence, backed by power but guided by the wisdom to recognize the new signals coming from Tehran, the United States can today achieve a principled solution to the nuclear crisis. Congress, vigilant American citizens and a resolute policy from America's European allies can ensure that this principled peace is given a chance.

Abbas Milani is the director of Iranian studies at Stanford and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/23/opinion/23milani.html>

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February 22, 2007
GovExec.com
DAILY BRIEFING

Legislators propose measure to speed up biodefense program

By Jon Fox, Global Security Newswire

Lawmakers have introduced legislation hoping to improve an effort to develop medical countermeasures for WMD attacks.

The bill, introduced in the House this week, is an attempt to address the lagging pace of Project Bioshield, a federal effort that has delivered little since it was launched nearly three years ago.

Designed to create an incentive for private enterprise to develop biological countermeasures to unconventional weapons, Bioshield dangles cash in front of biotech firms but gives no money until a product is delivered.

Officials at the helm of the \$5.6 million program have spent less than 25 percent of their budget, and late last year the Health and Human Services Department abandoned a \$1 billion contract with a California company to provide 75 million doses of an anthrax vaccine.

President Bush announced the Bioshield program during his State of the Union address in 2004, indicating the initiative would counter threats such as the plague and Ebola. To date, however, the program has done little to address these potential biological agents.

Bioshield's limited progress has attracted the attention of representatives on the House Homeland Security Committee who have highlighted the program as a focus for oversight and hearings this year.

"I'd just say I'm very concerned with some of the recent problems that have come to light with respect to the Bioshield project," Rep. James Langevin, D-R.I., said earlier this month. "For example, we all recently heard about the cancellation of VaxGen's contract for a next generation anthrax vaccine and, at the time, this was the only major procurement contract under BioShield."

Langevin, chairman of the homeland security subcommittee covering emerging threats, is a cosponsor of the new legislation.

Under the current program, the Homeland Security Department first identifies and assesses threats and countermeasures. Once that is completed, the Health and Human Services Department then selects firms to develop specific countermeasures.

The recently introduced bill is designed to accelerate the threat-assessment process. To the extent possible, the Homeland Security Department will be required to clump possible countermeasures into groups that might be able to address more than one chemical, biological or radiological agent.

"Rather than examining each threat individually, we should be looking for ways to properly group these threats together," Langevin said this week. "This legislation will promote a more strategic use of our nation's resources when procuring medical countermeasures."

The bill would also require that homeland security assessments of the most high-risk agents be completed by the end of 2007.

"Effective medical countermeasures for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear agents are a critical part of our nation's defense against terrorism, yet very few exist," said Rep. Mike McCaul, R-Texas, a member of the homeland security subcommittee for emerging threats.

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