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Los Angeles Times

April 14, 2007

North Korea Missing Date To Halt Nuclear Arms Program

A squabble over freeing funds in a Macao bank sets back compliance due today. The U.S. expresses frustration.

By Bob Drogin, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — North Korea will fail to meet today's deadline to halt its nuclear weapons program, but it is unclear whether the landmark disarmament agreement is nearing collapse even before it takes effect.

The Communist regime agreed two months ago to shut and seal all operations within 60 days at the primary nuclear facilities it has used to produce weapons-grade plutonium. In exchange, the United States and four other nations agreed to provide economic, humanitarian and energy assistance.

But a dispute over \$25 million frozen in dozens of North Korean accounts at a Macao bank for the last 18 months at the request of the Bush administration unexpectedly stopped the disarmament deal from proceeding.

After nearly two months of confusion over whether and how to release the funds, officials in the United States and Macao, a special administrative region of China, announced Wednesday that North Korea could collect the money.

But Pyongyang did not do so before the bank closed for the weekend. Washington originally had pledged to resolve the dispute over the frozen funds by mid-March.

Under the Feb. 13 disarmament deal, North Korea agreed to admit United Nations nuclear inspectors to monitor and verify the shutdown of a five-megawatt nuclear reactor and reprocessing facility at Yongbyon. North Korea also committed itself to disabling its nuclear production facilities in a follow-up phase.

Officials in Vienna at the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, said Friday that they had received no invitation, however. The officials said it would take about two weeks to arrange a full nuclear inspection at Yongbyon.

Meeting reporters in Beijing, chief U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill expressed frustration at North Korea's failure to even invite the IAEA inspectors in before the 60-day cutoff date.

"I think it's time for them to get on with their denuclearization obligations," he said.

Hill said he had no idea how long the North Koreans might now need to start shutting down operations.

"They could have done it, frankly, weeks ago," he added.

He said North Korea's approach was "certainly worrisome to all of us who see them approaching this date rather lethargically. We believe this date is something they can — they could have lived with."

Hill said he would discuss the response to North Korea's lack of action with the other parties to the February agreement: China, South Korea, Japan and Russia. He said that he did not discuss extending the deadline during his discussions with Chinese authorities earlier Friday, although he indicated that he had limited patience for a lengthy delay.

"I don't believe we can go on for another month," he said. "I don't want to put a date or hour, but another month is not in my constitution."

Tom Casey, a State Department spokesman, said in Washington that officials in Pyongyang still could "take steps to meet their commitments" short of the shutdown required under the agreement. He suggested that extending a last-minute invitation to IAEA inspectors would indicate progress.

"We need to see where we are tomorrow," he said.

North Korea has said it would begin shutting its nuclear program within days of retrieving the \$25 million. In its first public comments on the issue, the Foreign Ministry in Pyongyang said in a statement Friday that it would "confirm soon" whether the funds in fact were available, according to the state-run KCNA news agency.

The government "remains unchanged in its will to implement the Feb. 13 agreement and will also move when the lifting of the sanction is proved to be a reality," KCNA reported.

Financial authorities in Macao froze the funds at the Banco Delta Asia in September 2005 at the request of the U.S. Treasury, which declared that the money stemmed from drug trafficking, counterfeiting and other illegal activities. U.S. officials struggled to unfreeze the funds in recent weeks and finally concluded this week that the deadlock had been resolved so that North Korea, which denied the U.S. charges, could recover the money.

Bush administration officials this week described the freezing of the \$25 million as a bargaining chip in their diplomatic effort to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear arsenal. If so, the tactic had mixed results.

The initial U.S. decision to blacklist the bank so angered the government in Pyongyang that it refused to participate in nuclear arms talks for more than a year. During that time, North Korea stepped up its nuclear reprocessing program and finally tested a small nuclear device Oct. 9 in an underground chamber in the vicinity of Punggye. The government now is believed to have enough plutonium to fuel about six nuclear weapons.

New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democratic presidential hopeful who returned Friday from a visit to North Korea, said he believed the regime would move "early next week" to invite the IAEA inspectors in and start shutting the nuclear reactor and related facilities.

"They said they'll do it as soon as they get the money," he said in a telephone interview from Dallas. "I expect they'll keep their word."

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-usnorkor14apr14,1,7419721.story>

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New York Times

April 15, 2007

Eye On Iran, Rivals Also Want Nuclear Power

By William J. Broad and David E. Sanger

Two years ago, the leaders of Saudi Arabia told international atomic regulators that they could foresee no need for the kingdom to develop nuclear power. Today, they are scrambling to hire atomic contractors, buy nuclear hardware and build support for a regional system of reactors.

So, too, Turkey is preparing for its first atomic plant. And Egypt has announced plans to build one on its Mediterranean coast. In all, roughly a dozen states in the region have recently turned to the International Atomic

Energy Agency in Vienna for help in starting their own nuclear programs. While interest in nuclear energy is rising globally, it is unusually strong in the Middle East.

“The rules have changed,” King Abdullah II of Jordan recently told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. “Everybody’s going for nuclear programs.”

The Middle East states say they only want atomic power. Some probably do. But United States government and private analysts say they believe that the rush of activity is also intended to counter the threat of a nuclear Iran. By nature, the underlying technologies of nuclear power can make electricity or, with more effort, warheads, as nations have demonstrated over the decades by turning ostensibly civilian programs into sources of bomb fuel. Iran’s uneasy neighbors, analysts say, may be positioning themselves to do the same.

“One danger of Iran going nuclear has always been that it might provoke others,” said Mark Fitzpatrick, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, an arms analysis group in London. “So when you see the development of nuclear power elsewhere in the region, it’s a cause for some concern.”

Some analysts ask why Arab states in the Persian Gulf, which hold nearly half the world’s oil reserves, would want to shoulder the high costs and obligations of a temperamental form of energy. They reply that they must invest in the future, for the day when the flow of oil dries up.

But with Shiite Iran increasingly ascendant in the region, Sunni countries have alluded to other motives. Officials from 21 governments in and around the Middle East warned at a meeting of Arab leaders in March that Iran’s drive for atomic technology could result in the beginning of “a grave and destructive nuclear arms race in the region.”

In Washington, officials are seizing on such developments to build their case for stepping up pressure on Iran.

President Bush has talked privately to experts on the Middle East about his fears of a “Sunni bomb,” and his concerns that countries in the Middle East may turn to the only nuclear-armed Sunni state, Pakistan, for help.

Even so, that concern is tempered by caution. In an interview on Thursday, a senior administration official said that the recent announcements were “clearly part of an effort to send a signal to Iran that two can play this game.” And, he added, “among the non-Iranian programs I’ve heard about in the region, I have not heard talk of reprocessing or enrichment, which is what would worry us the most.”

The Middle East has seen hints of a regional nuclear-arms race before. After Israel obtained its first weapon four decades ago, several countries took steps down the nuclear road. But many analysts say it is Iran’s atomic intransigence that has now prodded the Sunni powers into getting serious about hedging their bets and, like Iran, financing them with \$65-a-barrel oil.

“Now’s the time to worry,” said Geoffrey Kemp, a Middle East expert at the Nixon Center, a Washington policy institute. “The Iranians have to worry, too. The idea that they’ll emerge as the regional hegemon is silly. There will be a very serious counterreaction, certainly in conventional military buildups but also in examining the nuclear option.”

No Arab country now has a power reactor, whose spent fuel can be mined for plutonium, one of the two favored materials — along with uranium — for making the cores of atom bombs. Some Arab states do, however, engage in civilian atomic research.

Analysts caution that a chain reaction of nuclear emulation is not foreordained. States in the Middle East appear to be waiting to see which way Tehran’s nuclear standoff with the United Nations Security Council goes before committing themselves wholeheartedly to costly programs of atomic development.

Even if Middle Eastern nations do obtain nuclear power, political alliances and arms-control agreements could still make individual states hesitate before crossing the line to obtain warheads. Many may eventually decide that the costs and risks outweigh the benefits — as South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa and Libya did after investing heavily in arms programs.

But many diplomats and analysts say that the Sunni Arab governments are so anxious about Iran’s nuclear progress that they would even, grudgingly, support a United States military strike against Iran.

“If push comes to shove, if the choice is between an Iranian nuclear bomb and a U.S. military strike, then the Arab gulf states have no choice but to quietly support the U.S.,” said Christian Koch, director of international studies at the Gulf Research Center, a private group in Dubai.

Decades ago, it was Israel’s drive for nuclear arms that brought about the region’s first atomic jitters. Even some Israeli leaders found themselves “preaching caution because of the reaction,” said Avner Cohen, a senior fellow at the University of Maryland and the author of “Israel and the Bomb.”

Egypt responded first. In 1960, after the disclosure of Israel’s work on a nuclear reactor, Cairo threatened to acquire atomic arms and sought its own reactor. Years of technical and political hurdles ultimately ended that plan.

Iraq came next. But in June 1981, Israeli fighter jets bombed its reactor just days before engineers planned to install the radioactive core. The bombing ignited a global debate over how close Iraq had come to nuclear arms. It also prompted Iran, then fighting a war with Iraq, to embark on a covert response.

Alireza Assar, a nuclear adviser to Iran's Ministry of Defense who later defected, said he attended a secret meeting in 1987 at which the commander in chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said Iran had to do whatever was necessary to achieve victory. "We need to have all the technical requirements in our possession," Dr. Assar recalled the commander as saying, even the means to "build a nuclear bomb."

In all, Iran toiled in secret for 18 years before its nuclear efforts were disclosed in 2003. Intelligence agencies and nuclear experts now estimate that the Iranians are 2 to 10 years away from having the means to make a uranium-based bomb. It says its uranium enrichment work is entirely peaceful and meant only to fuel reactors.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's concerns grew when inspectors found evidence of still-unexplained ties between Iran's ostensibly peaceful program and its military, including work on high explosives, missiles and warheads. That combination, the inspectors said in early 2006, suggested a "military nuclear dimension."

Before such disclosures, few if any states in the Middle East attended the atomic agency's meetings on nuclear power development. Now, roughly a dozen are doing so and drawing up atomic plans.

The newly interested states include Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Yemen and the seven sheikdoms of the United Arab Emirates — Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Al Fujayrah, Ras al Khaymah, Sharjah, and Umm al Qaywayn.

"They generally ask what they need to do for the introduction of power," said R. Ian Facer, a nuclear power engineer who works for the I.A.E.A. at its headquarters in Vienna. The agency teaches the basics of nuclear energy. In exchange, states must undergo periodic inspections to make sure their civilian programs have no military spinoffs. Saudi Arabia, since reversing itself on reactors, has become a whirlwind of atomic interest. It recently invited President Vladimir V. Putin to become the first Russian head of state to visit the desert kingdom. He did so in February, offering a range of nuclear aid.

Diplomats and analysts say Saudi Arabia leads the drive for nuclear power within the Gulf Cooperation Council, based in Riyadh. In addition to the Saudis, the council includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — Washington's closest Arab allies. Its member states hug the western shores of the Persian Gulf and control about 45 percent of the world's oil reserves.

Late last year, the council announced that it would embark on a nuclear energy program. Its officials have said they want to get it under way by 2009.

"We will develop it openly," Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, said of the council's effort. "We want no bombs. All we want is a whole Middle East that is free from weapons of mass destruction," an Arab reference to both Israel's and Iran's nuclear programs.

In February, the council and the I.A.E.A. struck a deal to work together on a nuclear power plan for the Arab gulf states. Abdul Rahman ibn Hamad al-Attiya, the council's secretary general, told reporters in March that the agency would provide technical expertise and that the council would hire a consulting firm to speed its nuclear deliberations.

Already, Saudi officials are traveling regularly to Vienna, and I.A.E.A. officials to Riyadh, the Saudi capital. "It's a natural right," Mohamed ElBaradei, the atomic agency's director general, said recently of the council's energy plan, estimating that carrying it out might take up to 15 years.

Every gulf state except Iraq has declared an interest in nuclear power. By comparison, 15 percent of South American nations and 20 percent of African ones have done so.

One factor in that exceptional level of interest is that the Persian Gulf states have the means. Typically, a large commercial reactor costs up to \$4 billion. The six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council are estimated to be investing in nonnuclear projects valued at more than \$1 trillion.

Another factor is Iran. Its shores at some points are visible across the waters of the gulf — called the Arabian Gulf by Arabs and the Persian Gulf by Iranians.

The council wants "its own regional initiative to counter the possible threat from an aggressive neighbor armed with nuclear weapons," said Nicole Stracke, an analyst at the Gulf Research Center. Its members, she added, "felt they could no longer lag behind Iran."

A similar technology push is under way in Turkey, where long-simmering plans for nuclear power have caught fire. Last year, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for three plants. "We want to benefit from nuclear energy as soon as possible," he said. Turkey plans to put its first reactor near the Black Sea port of Sinop, and to start construction this year.

Egypt, too, is moving forward. Last year, it announced plans for a reactor at El-Dabaa, about 60 miles west of Alexandria. "We do not start from a vacuum," President Hosni Mubarak told the governing National Democracy Party's annual conference. His remark was understated given Cairo's decades of atomic research.

Robert Joseph, a former under secretary of state for arms control and international security who is now Mr. Bush's envoy on nuclear nonproliferation, visited Egypt earlier this year. According to officials briefed on the conversations, officials from the Ministry of Electricity indicated that if Egypt was confident that it could have a

reliable supply of reactor fuel, it would have little desire to invest in the costly process of manufacturing its own nuclear fuel — the enterprise that experts fear could let Iran build a bomb.

Other officials, especially those responsible for Egypt's security, focused more on the possibility of further proliferation in the region if Iran succeeded in its effort to achieve a nuclear weapons capability.

"I don't know how much of it is real," Mr. Joseph said of a potential arms race. "But it is becoming urgent for us to shape the future expansion of nuclear energy in a way that reduces the risks of proliferation, while meeting our energy and environmental goals."

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/world/middleeast/15sunnis.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

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New York Times

April 15, 2007

North Korea Misses Important Deadline

By David E. Sanger

WASHINGTON, April 14 — The first deadline for North Korea to shut down and seal its main facility for manufacturing nuclear weapons fuel expired Saturday with no apparent action by the North to fulfill its commitments, while China asked angry officials in the Bush administration to show patience.

The inaction leaves President Bush vulnerable to attacks from hawks in his own party, who have argued that it was a mistake to return \$25 million in frozen funds to the North Koreans — much of it believed to be from illicit sales of counterfeit currency and missiles — and who doubt that the North Koreans will stop producing bomb fuel as well as give up all of its existing weapons.

The White House was silent about the missed deadline, but the chief American negotiator dealing with the North, Christopher R. Hill, told reporters in Beijing, "We don't have a lot of momentum right now. That is for sure."

Mr. Hill has traveled over the past week to Japan, South Korea and, most recently, China, where officials urged him to allow a little time for the North Koreans to fulfill the accord. But in Washington, officials said they did not know if the Chinese had any independent indications from the North that compliance was forthcoming, or if the North was simply trying to buy some time.

North Korean officials told a visiting American delegation earlier this week that they would begin the process of shutting down their reactor at Yongbyon, where for years they have produced plutonium from spent nuclear fuel, as soon as the \$25 million was returned. The process has taken far longer than American officials expected, in part because the legal mechanisms for returning the money turned out to be enormously complicated, leading the Bush administration to give up its demand that all illicit funds had to be used for some kind of humanitarian purpose.

But the agreement that Mr. Hill signed with North Korea on Feb. 13 — in talks that also included China, Russia, Japan and South Korea — gave the North 60 days to deactivate and seal its main plant at Yongbyon, invite back international inspectors and provide a preliminary accounting of how much plutonium it has produced. The country had apparently taken none of those steps by Saturday.

During a visit to North Korea this week by Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for president, officials in Pyongyang said they would fulfill those obligations within 30 days of receiving the money that was held in accounts of Banco Delta Asia, in Macao. Investigators from the United States Treasury and American intelligence agencies pored through records of the frozen accounts, mapped the banking activities of state-owned companies, arms traders and the leaders surrounding President Kim Jong-il.

"This was the first thing we ever did that got the North Koreans' attention," a senior White House official said in an interview this week, declining to speculate how the administration would react if the North Koreans missed the first deadlines for shutting its facilities.

In fact, some administration officials acknowledge that they have few good options. With the money cleared for return, the Macao accounts no longer provide diplomatic leverage. That leaves the administration more dependent than ever on pressure from China, the North's main supplier of energy and aid, to force North Korea to live up to the agreement.

Nicholas Eberstadt, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, said that turning the money back to the North "complicates the logic of the Proliferation Security Initiative," the administration's plan to stop countries from illicit shipments of weapons, because it is allowing the North to retrieve its profits from those activities.

"It also goes contrary to the Security Council resolution" passed at Washington's urging after North Korea's nuclear test on Oct. 9, he said. The test was something of a fizzle, a subkiloton explosion, but it was enough to win unanimous passage of a resolution that imposes new economic sanctions on the North.

Now, Mr. Eberstadt said, "the North Koreans can force the Bush administration into continuing, humiliating reversals of its policy."

But administration officials dispute that view, arguing that Mr. Bush never reversed his policy. They contend that he simply waited for the right moment to strike the deal, after the nuclear test angered China's leaders enough to move them from a neutral arbiter in the talks to a source of pressure on the North. North Korea reached the deal, they argue, because both China and South Korea cut aid.

In public statements, both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley, have defended the accord as far more effective than an agreement signed between North Korea and President Bill Clinton in 1994, freezing the Yongbyon plant.

"What you are hearing," one senior official said, "are the complaints of a lot of people who simply don't think we should be dealing with the North Koreans at all."

Among those who have objected, though, are former Bush administration officials who believe that the president has been so eager for a diplomatic coup that he has given up his principles — and is perpetuating Mr. Kim's rule. Mr. Bush's former ambassador to the United Nations, John R. Bolton, recently expressed the hope that the North Koreans would violate the Feb. 13 agreement and give Mr. Bush an excuse to renounce the deal.

"One sign of whether we are in trouble is whether the administration will call this a 'violation' or use words like 'noncompliance,'" Mr. Bolton said recently, anticipating that North Korea would miss the Saturday deadline.

Assuming that the North allows in international inspectors and seals the Yongbyon plant and the nearby nuclear reprocessing facility where it turns spent nuclear fuel into bomb-grade plutonium, it would then have to move on to the hardest part of the agreement. It is required to "disable" the nuclear facilities, a term that the agreement does not define.

Ultimately, it would have to account for, and surrender, all of its nuclear weapons, an arsenal that American intelligence agencies believe has grown from enough fuel for one or two weapons when Mr. Bush took office, to fuel for somewhere between a half-dozen and a dozen weapons.

Thom Shanker contributed reporting.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/world/asia/15korea.html>

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Washington Times

April 16, 2007

Pg. 1

Caches Of Nitric Acid Seized In Baghdad

U.S. troops find barrels after tip from neighbors

By Sharon Behn, Washington Times

BAGHDAD - U.S. troops said yesterday that they had found two large caches of nitric acid a highly corrosive substance with chemical weapons potential in abandoned houses used by Sunni insurgents in western Baghdad.

Other chemically laced bombs used in terrorist attacks recently have been spiked with chlorine.

Acting on a tip from neighbors, members of the Stryker Brigade's Alpha Company found 31 barrels of nitric acid Saturday in the walled-off front yard of a house that had been raided less than two weeks earlier.

Members of the same company were clearing another abandoned house a few hundred yards away when they found an additional two 5-gallon containers of nitric acid.

They also discovered four 50-pound bags of an unknown powder, artillery casings filled with the powder, several buckets for mixing, zinc oxide and benzene.

Nitric acid "is one of the chemicals used to make homemade explosives," said Sgt. 1st Class Douglas Wallace, battalion medic for the 2nd battalion, 3rd infantry regiment of the 3-2 Stryker Brigade.

"It's an acid and causes chemical burns to the skin and burns the lungs and esophagus if it is inhaled," Sgt. Wallace told The Washington Times.

Capt. Jon Fursman of the Stryker Alpha Company said that eight men had been arrested at the first house and that neighbors had alerted U.S. forces to the chemicals.

"All were clearly labeled in English, with standard hazmat labels," said Capt. Fursman.

The finds came amid unremitting terrorist attacks to defeat a two-month-old U.S. effort to pacify Baghdad with thousands of additional U.S. troops.

Six bombs exploded in predominantly Shi'ite sections of the capital yesterday, killing at least 45 persons, the Associated Press reported.

On the political front, beleaguered Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki suffered another blow when two officials close to the radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr said his followers would quit their Cabinet posts today, raising a threat that the government could collapse, AP said.

The bomb-making materials were discovered in the upscale and predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Mansour, next to the heavily fortified Green Zone, which houses the U.S. Embassy, the Iraqi parliament and many government agencies.

Several of the nitric acid containers had been punctured or opened, requiring explosives-ordinance specialists to dispose of the chemicals.

Eleven troops were later treated for exposure to the chemicals and were released within hours.

While clearing a second house in the same neighborhood yesterday, the team discovered another abandoned house that appeared to be a bomb-making factory with two more 5-gallon containers of nitric acid.

"We found two different off-white substances in large feed bags that looked almost like granulated sugar and also another white substance on an impromptu drying mat that was a fine white powder," said Capt. Fursman.

In other developments yesterday:

Two British helicopters crashed north of Baghdad killing two troops.

The U.S. military said two U.S. soldiers and one Marine had been killed.

In the Shi'ite city of Karbala, officials raised the death toll to 47, with 224 wounded, from a bombing of one of the sect's most sacred shrines one day earlier, AP reported.

<http://www.washtimes.com/world/20070415-115817-6680r.htm>

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New York Times

April 16, 2007

Pg. 3

Iran Says It Wants Bidders For 2 More Nuclear Plants

By Nazila Fathi

TEHRAN, April 15 — Iran said Sunday that it was seeking international bids for building two more nuclear power plants despite international pressure over its nuclear program.

"Iran is launching two international tenders for the construction of two nuclear power stations of between 1,000 and 1,600 megawatts capacity in Bushehr," said Ahmad Fayazbakhsh, the deputy head of the nation's Atomic Energy Organization, who was quoted by the ISNA news agency.

He said that contacts had already been made with Russian and European firms, but that with Iran under United Nations sanctions because of its nuclear program, it was unclear if companies would want the risk of taking on the projects.

Russia helped Iran build its first, nearly completed, nuclear reactor in the southern city of Bushehr. But Russia has since informed Iran that it will withhold nuclear fuel for the plant unless Iran suspends its uranium enrichment as demanded by the United Nations Security Council, according to European, American and Iranian officials.

Uranium enriched to low levels can fuel reactors; if enriched to high levels, it can fuel nuclear weapons.

The United States and some European governments have accused Iran of having a clandestine weapons program, but Iran contends that its program is peaceful, for energy purposes, and that it wants to produce fuel for reactors.

Iran also announced this month that it had started industrial-scale production of enriched uranium at Natanz. The announcement was greeted with skepticism by Western diplomats and nuclear experts.

The Security Council has passed two resolutions since December that impose sanctions and press Iran to suspend its enrichment program.

The newly announced projects would be expected to take between 9 and 11 years and cost more than \$1 billion, according to Mr. Fayazbakhsh. It is unclear if Iran is serious about pursuing the projects or if it is trying to build a better case for why it needs to produce its own enriched uranium.

The nearly completed Bushehr plant has a 1,000-megawatt capacity. The Iranian government has neither confirmed nor denied a report that Russia has asked Iran to suspend uranium enrichment.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/16/world/middleeast/16iran.html>

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Los Angeles Times

April 16, 2007

N. Korea Reminded To Fulfill Its Pledge

U.S. is displeased by the failure to shut a nuclear reactor but says it will wait a few more days.

By Associated Press

SEOUL — The U.S. said Sunday that North Korea must act within days on a pledge to halt its nuclear weapons program, after the Pyongyang government failed to meet a Saturday deadline to shut down and seal a nuclear reactor.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill said Washington was prepared "to hold on for a few more days" after his Chinese counterpart, Wu Dawei, asked the U.S. for patience.

"We're not happy that the [North] essentially has missed this very important deadline," Hill told reporters after talks with Wu in Beijing. "We're obviously going to be watching the situation very closely in the coming days."

The United States sent a message to North Korea through its embassy in China urging it to fulfill commitments of a February agreement that would give the Pyongyang regime energy aid and political concessions in return for disarming.

The North said last week it would proceed only when it received money from accounts frozen in 2005 after the U.S. blacklisted a Macao bank suspected of money laundering and other illicit activities. The \$25 million was freed last week, but it remains unclear when the North will receive the money.

Hill said he expected the countries involved in the talks — China, Japan, Russia, the U.S. and North and South Korea — would meet before month's end to discuss the next steps.

No official comment has come from the North, which was preoccupied Sunday with celebrations of the birthday of late founder Kim Il Sung.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-norkor16apr16,1,7894518.story?coll=la-headlines-world>

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Los Angeles Times

April 17, 2007

Truck Overtakes En Route To Chemical Attack, U.S. Says

Explosives and nitric acid are found inside. Military site was target.

By Reuters

BAGHDAD — A truck laden with nitric acid and explosives overturned before the driver could attack a joint security station operated by U.S. and Iraqi troops north of Baghdad, the U.S. military said today.

The use of nitric acid in bomb attacks could mark another shift in tactics by insurgents, who in recent months have rigged nearly a dozen truck bombs with chlorine gas, mainly in Al Anbar province.

In a statement, the U.S. military said a security patrol went to assist the driver of the truck after it overturned and found it loaded with eight containers of nitric acid and explosives.

It said the driver said he had been paid to attack the security station in Mushada.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-chemical17apr17,1,4633809.story?coll=la-headlines-world>

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Los Angeles Times

April 17, 2007

N. Korea May Shut Reactor Soon

Activity near its main nuclear facility may be in preparation to shutter it, news reports say.

By Associated Press

SEOUL — North Korea may be preparing to shut down its main nuclear reactor, news reports said today, renewing hopes that Pyongyang will comply with a disarmament agreement days after it missed a deadline to shutter the facility.

The reports came a day after a South Korean official said his government might suspend rice shipments to North Korea to ratchet up pressure on the North to comply with its nuclear disarmament pledges.

The Yongbyon reactor was still in operation, but there was a high possibility that movement of cars and people seen in satellite photos could be linked to a shutdown, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported, citing an unidentified intelligence official. The Dong-A Ilbo daily carried a similar report.

The reports come after the North missed a Saturday deadline to shut down the reactor and allow U.N. inspectors to verify that and seal the facility under a February accord with the U.S. and four other countries.

Pyongyang said last week that honoring its pledge was contingent on the release of money frozen in a Macao bank. Washington had blacklisted the bank because a U.S. investigation concluded that funds in the North Korean accounts were used in money laundering and counterfeiting.

The money was freed for withdrawal last week, but it was unclear when North Korea would move to get its \$25 million.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-norkor17apr17,1,353279.story?coll=la-headlines-world>

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Boost In Iran's Capacity To Enrich Uranium Noted

But Bomb-Making Ability Is Far Off, IAEA Says

By Dafna Linzer, Washington Post Staff Writer

Iran has doubled its capacity to enrich uranium in the past two months but remains far from the technological know-how the Bush administration fears and the capabilities that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently claimed, according to an official letter written by a senior U.N. nuclear inspector yesterday.

The letter to Iranian officials from Olli Heinonen, a deputy director general at the International Atomic Energy Agency, confirmed that, in a visit earlier this week, inspectors saw eight separate lines -- or "cascades" -- with 164 centrifuges each operating at a nuclear enrichment facility in the town of Natanz and that "some uranium is being fed into those cascades." A copy of the letter was made available to The Washington Post.

In February, inspectors reported seeing four such cascades operating at the same site, but none was enriching uranium. At the time, Iranian officials said they hoped to be operating 18 cascades by May, each one of which could enrich uranium.

Ahmadinejad and his aides suggested two weeks ago that Iran had reached that goal and was operating 3,000 centrifuges, a number that would signal significant progress in the country's effort to enrich large quantities of uranium. But on Sunday and Monday, inspectors saw a total of 1,312 centrifuges in separate cascades, according to the letter. It remains unclear how effectively they are running, because Iran has encountered considerable technological hurdles in the past two years.

If Iran masters the technology to run the centrifuges in large cascades at high speeds for prolonged periods, it could produce enough uranium for a nuclear bomb. So far, it has not demonstrated the ability to properly build, assemble or run centrifuges that spin uranium at high speeds to purify it for uses such as fuel.

"The whole game for the Iranians is to present a fait accompli," said one U.S. official who agreed to discuss sensitive aspects of the program on the condition of anonymity. "They can put thousands and thousands of centrifuges together, but if none operate the way they need to over a sustained period, then they haven't mastered enrichment. But they want to create the impression that they have and then use it as a bargaining ploy in negotiations."

U.S. intelligence officials have estimated that Iran is as many as 10 years away from being able to manufacture enough uranium for a single weapon and the means to deliver it. Iranian officials say their efforts are aimed solely at producing low-enriched uranium for a future nuclear energy program. But Bush administration officials have charged that the effort is a cover for a weapons program that must be stopped. Because the same system can produce either low-grade or bomb-grade uranium, U.S. officials have said that Iran should be prevented from using the technology until there is international confidence that the country's intentions are peaceful.

On a stop in Israel yesterday, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said there is time for diplomacy in dealing with Iran's program, a strategy, he said, that "appears to be working."

"These things don't work overnight, but it seems to me clearly the preferable course to keep our focus on the diplomatic initiatives, and particularly because of the united front of the international community at this point," he added.

The IAEA letter, addressed to Iran's ambassador to the agency, noted that Tehran recently agreed -- after several months of negotiations -- to allow inspectors to make unannounced visits in Natanz and to install tamper-proof 24-hour monitoring cameras directed at the cascades. "I trust that these arrangements will be implemented as agreed," Heinonen wrote.

But Heinonen took exception with an Iranian decision to end inspections at a nuclear research reactor under construction in the city of Arak. U.N. Security Council resolutions have called on Iran to stop work at Arak and Natanz or face increased economic sanctions.

Iran maintains that its program is permissible under the terms of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and that it has no intention of complying with the resolutions.

Before the resolutions were passed, Tehran agreed to inspections at Arak, and agency representatives visited the site in January. But after the most recent U.N. sanctions were imposed, in March, Iran responded by notifying the agency that it was ending access.

In the letter, Heinonen said the action "was not justified" and that it is the legal opinion of the agency that the agreement "cannot be modified unilaterally." An IAEA official, who agreed to discuss the differences on the condition of anonymity, said there is no suspicion that Iran is concealing work at Arak. "It's just the principle" of access, the official said.

Staff writer Ann Scott Tyson contributed to this report from Israel.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/18/AR2007041801916.html>

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DAILY BRIEFING

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House panel mulls stalled progress on biodefense program

By Otto Kreisher, CongressDaily

A House Homeland Security panel Wednesday voiced bipartisan concern that legislation intended to accelerate the production of defenses against chemical, biological or radiological terrorist attacks has done little to make the nation safer, six years after anthrax-laced letters killed five people and paralyzed the U.S. Capitol.

Homeland Security Emerging Threats Subcommittee Chairman Jim Langevin, D-R.I., and ranking member Michael McCaul, R-Texas, cited the recent cancellation of programs to develop protections against anthrax and radiation that were initiated under the 2004 Project BioShield law as indications of problems with the \$5.6 billion program.

"This critical program is far too important to fail," Langevin said. "Unfortunately, since its creation, BioShield has enjoyed varying levels of success, and in recent months, there have been some fairly significant setbacks this committee is particularly concerned with."

McCaul observed that the 2001 anthrax incidents have never been solved and said BioShield "has had a rough start" because the Health and Human Services Department, which helps the Homeland Security Department implement the program, "has made what I consider missteps."

House Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said "mistakes have been made" in developing and implementing the program, pointing out that BioShield has awarded contracts for vaccines or treatments only for three threats while the Centers for Disease Control has listed more than 30 agents of concern.

"We need to get this program to a state where it is procuring enough medicine and vaccines to protect the American people," Thompson said.

Implementation of the program was criticized sharply by Richard Hollis, chief executive officer of Hollis-Eden Pharmaceuticals. The firm's proposed treatment for acute radiation sickness was rejected after it invested two and a half years and \$85 million to develop and test the product and, he said, had met all the requirements set out in the law.

Unless Congress forces major changes, "the BioShield program will remain fundamentally broken," Hollis said.

But a more positive view of the program was presented by James Davis, senior vice president of Human Genome Sciences, which won a contract to produce 100,000 doses of a new treatment for anthrax.

Officials from Homeland Security, HHS, the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration conceded that there were some weaknesses in the BioShield legislation, particularly in the ability to encourage firms to invest in the frequently long and expensive development of new vaccines and medicines.

"What is still missing is a commitment by private industry to invest," said Jeffrey Runge, Homeland Security's chief medical officer.

Gerald Parker, principal deputy assistant HHS secretary for preparedness and response, insisted that progress has been made in protecting the nation from bio-terrorism, citing eight programs initiated under BioShield to improve protection against smallpox, anthrax, botulism and radiation.

Parker acknowledged the failure of Hollis' anti-radiation effort and the cancellation of a contract with VaxGen, Inc. to produce a "second-generation" anthrax vaccine. But he said the department has developed a new strategy for developing a better anthrax vaccine and is working to attract industry to produce other needed bio-terrorism defenses.

The administration officials and lawmakers all said legislation passed last year to create the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Agency should help encourage firms to invest in bio-terrorism defenses by providing some government funding for advanced development and testing of promising new products.

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