

Iran reveals existence of second uranium enrichment plant

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President Obama and the leaders of France and Britain blasted Iran's construction of a previously unacknowledged uranium enrichment facility and demanded Friday that Tehran immediately fulfill its obligations under international law or risk the imposition of harsh new sanctions.

"Iran is breaking rules that all nations must follow," Obama said, detailing how the facility near Qom had been under construction for years without being disclosed, as required, to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). "International law is not an empty promise."

The new Iranian plant, the country's second uranium enrichment facility, is believed by U.S. officials to be part of a broad effort by Iran's leadership to pursue the ability to build nuclear weapons. Iran has repeatedly denied having any such goal, insisting that its nuclear program is aimed at generating electricity. U.S. officials said they believe the Qom plant is not yet operational but is intended to produce highly enriched uranium -- suitable for nuclear weapons -- and will be capable within months of producing enough material for at least one bomb per year.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is in New York for a U.N. General Assembly meeting, strongly rejected Obama's assertions, insisted that Iran's actions were "completely legal" and indicated that new facility is at least a year and a half away from startup. He warned Western officials against pressing their case about the new enrichment plant during upcoming talks with major world powers on nuclear issues.

"If I were Obama's adviser, I would definitely advise him to refrain making this statement because it is definitely a mistake," Ahmadinejad told Time magazine Friday in an interview that took place even as Obama was publicly revealing the plant's existence. "It would definitely be a mistake."

He dismissed the idea that "we must inform Mr. Obama's administration of every facility that we have" and said the uproar over the plant "simply adds to the list of issues [over] which the United States owes the Iranian nation an apology."

Ahmadinejad later told a news conference in New York that the IAEA can inspect the Qom plant. "We don't have any problems with [IAEA] inspections of the facility," he said. "We have no fears."

He said the IAEA "will come and take a look and produce a report and nothing new." In apparent response to Western criticism Friday, he demanded, "What business of yours is it to tell us what we must do or not?"

Ahmadinejad also repeated -- as he told The Washington Post on Wednesday -- that Iran hopes to buy enriched uranium for medical purposes, and he said he hopes that the talks next week would help reduce tension.

In a statement, the Russian government said the new uranium enrichment plant "violates decisions of the United Nations Security Council." It said the IAEA "must investigate this site immediately, and Iran must cooperate with this investigation." The Kremlin also urged Iran to "provide proof of its commitment to a peaceful nuclear program" by a scheduled meeting Oct. 1 between representatives of Iran and six world powers: the United States, Russia, China, Britain France and Germany.

China said it hoped the IAEA would deal with the issue in accordance with its mandate and called for negotiation with Iran, rather than punishment. He Yafei, China's vice minister for foreign affairs, told reporters in response to a question, "You talk about punishment, and personally I don't like the word 'punishment,' and I think all issues can only be solved through dialogue and negotiation."

In Tehran, Ali Akbar Salehi, who was appointed by Ahmadinejad in July as head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said the country took "a new successful step toward building another semi-industrial nuclear fuel enrichment plant" as part of its effort "to preserve and enjoy its undeniable right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes."

He added in a statement: "Currently, Iran is building these facilities while observing all aspects such as passive defense." He asserted that the activities of the new plant and Iran's other nuclear installations "are within the framework of the IAEA regulations."

Salehi, a U.S.-educated nuclear physicist, later said on Iranian state television that the Qom facility was built to "guarantee the continuation of our nuclear activities," which he vowed "will not be stopped under any circumstances." He dismissed Western concerns as "propaganda" and asserted that Iran informed the IAEA about the site in a "timely" fashion. He said, "We act based on our obligations, and we do not need anybody's recommendation. This site has been announced on time . . . and there is no problem regarding this site."

In an appearance with Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy Friday morning, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called the Iranian nuclear program "the most urgent proliferation challenge that the world faces today" and accused Iran of "serial deception" over many years. He said the level of Iran's deception and the scale of its breach of international commitments "will shock and anger the whole international community, and it will harden our resolve."

"We will not let this matter rest," Brown said. "And we are prepared to implement further and more stringent sanctions. . . . Iran must abandon any military ambitions for its nuclear program."

Iran acknowledged the existence of the facility for the first time on Monday, in a letter to the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency. The letter said "a new pilot fuel enrichment plant is under construction in the country," said Marc Vidricaire, a spokesman for the watchdog agency. "The letter stated that the enrichment level would be up to 5 percent." That level is far below the enrichment level needed for nuclear weapons.

Vidricaire said the agency responded by asking Iran to quickly provide more specifics about the facility -- "to assess safeguards verification requirements." He said Iran told the IAEA "that no nuclear material has been introduced into the facility."

But White House officials said Western intelligence agencies have known about the facility for several years and believe that Iran acknowledged its existence Monday in an attempt to head off intense criticism that they knew was coming.

"We believe that the Iranians learned that the secrecy of the facility had been compromised," a senior White House official said Friday morning. "We've been aware of this facility for several years, building up a case so that we had very strong evidence."

Officials from the United States, France and Britain rushed to brief the IAEA in Vienna on Thursday on what they knew about the facility. U.S. officials said that detailed briefing was provided in an attempt to spark an immediate investigation by the international organization.

U.S. intelligence officials said that while they have known for several years about underground construction on the site about 20 miles north of Qom, their confidence about its purpose increased measurably this year. They described the plant as located in series of tunnels deep within a mountain on a base belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Qom, a Shiite Muslim holy city about 100 miles southwest of Tehran, is considered the birthplace of the religious movement that led to Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution.

The plant "is under the management of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, but its existence is unknown to all but the most senior officials," one official said.

Asked about the certainty of U.S. intelligence, the official said that "we have excellent clandestine collection" and "multiple, independent sources . . . that allow us to corroborate. We are highly confident that the facility is for uranium enrichment."

Early this year, the official said, Iran began installing the infrastructure required for 3,000 centrifuges that could produce highly-enriched uranium at the facility sometime next year. At full capacity, its output would be enough to produce material for about one nuclear weapon a year.

Officials said this knowledge did not alter their current assessment that Iran would be able to produce a nuclear weapon sometime between 2010 and 2015.

A senior administration official said U.S. intelligence has worked closely with British and French counterparts. Over the course of the year, this official said, "we have gained confidence about the information we have individually and collectively" gathered. During the summer, Obama ordered that the information be put together into a comprehensive presentation so that by September the United States would be "in position where we could actually do a detailed, credible brief about this particular facility."

Until they received news Tuesday of the Iranian letter to the IAEA, officials said, they had not yet determined when and where they would use the information. They said they were uncertain how Iran found out about their plans but that the letter appeared to be an attempt to preempt any U.S. disclosure.

On Tuesday evening, Obama decided he would reveal the intelligence to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at a previously-scheduled meeting on Wednesday. U.S. officials also briefed the IAEA in Vienna to "fill in the blanks" of what officials described as Iran's vague description of new construction. "They're the investigating agency," the senior administration official said. "They are in a position where they will now demand to go see it within a short period of time."

Asked if Israel had been kept apprised of the unfolding intelligence, an intelligence official said that "we have regular international exchanges with our partners" and that "Iranian nuclear activity is a topic that is regularly discussed."

Obama and other Western leaders have been trying to increase pressure on Iran to disclose more about its nuclear ambitions in advance of international talks next week about Iran's nuclear program. On Oct. 1, a senior Iranian diplomat is scheduled to meet in Geneva with counterparts from the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany, a group known as the P5-plus-one.

U.S. officials described the upcoming meeting as a key moment in the nuclear standoff, saying that the new revelations about the Qom nuclear facility will be at the top of the agenda.

"We expect a serious response from Iran" during the talks, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said this week in a statement approved by the six nations. If such a response is not forthcoming, he said, the six nations will decide on "next steps."

Sarkozy said bluntly that new, tougher sanctions must be imposed by December if Iran does not comply with the international community's demands.

U.S. officials said that timeline is consistent with Obama's stated determination to confront the issue of Iranian nuclear ambitions by the end of this year.

They said Chinese and Russian officials have been briefed about the Qom plant and that international resolve about the issue is nearly unanimous.

On Wednesday, Medvedev said after meeting with Obama privately that sanctions on Iran might be necessary. A senior national security official said Obama was briefed about the existence of the plant during his transition into office and that he directed the intelligence community over the summer to develop a comprehensive presentation for the IAEA. But the United States postponed giving that presentation in an attempt to build a stronger case that the facility could not be used for more benign purposes, officials said.

The waiting ended, officials said, when Iran recently discovered that its secret was out. Following Iran's letter on Monday, which officials described as a vague mention of the new facility with few details, the United States and its allies scrambled to give their presentation.

"We thought it was very important to wait until the facility had reached the stage of construction and was undeniably" designed to produce material for nuclear weapons, one of the officials said.

Iran's acknowledgment of the facility's existence -- and Obama's plans to accuse Tehran of hiding it -- were first reported Friday by the New York Times.

Obama, Brown and Sarkozy spoke in advance of the opening of the Group of 20 summit in Pittsburgh. Their remarks came a day after Obama chaired a United Nations Security Council session on halting the spread of nuclear weapons throughout the world. Although Obama referred to the nuclear ambitions of both Iran and North Korea during the Security Council session, diplomatic maneuvering kept any mention of the two countries out of a resolution that the council unanimously approved. The omission prompted passionate criticism from Sarkozy.

"How, before the eyes of the world, could we justify meeting without tackling them?" Sarkozy said. "We live in the real world, not a virtual world. And the real world expects us to take decisions."

On Friday, he said Iran is "taking the international community on a dangerous path." He said the plant near Qom was "designed and built over the past several years in direct violation" of Security Council and IAEA resolutions, and he demanded "an exhaustive, strict and rigorous investigation" by the nuclear watchdog agency.

Referring to an upcoming meeting in Geneva between representatives of Iran and six world powers, Sarkozy said, "Everything, everything, must be put on the table now. We cannot let the Iranian leaders gain time while the motors are running." If there is no "in-depth change" on Iran's part by December, "sanctions will have to be taken," he said.

Obama, who spoke in more measured terms, did not mention sanctions specifically. But he said the United States is "committed to demonstrating that international law is not an empty promise, that obligations must be kept and that treaties will be enforced."

Noting that Tehran previously has concealed information about its nuclear program, Obama said: "Iran has a right to peaceful nuclear power that meets the energy needs of its people. But the size and configuration of this facility is inconsistent with a peaceful program." He accused Iran of "endangering the global nonproliferation regime, denying its own people access to the opportunity they deserve and threatening the stability and security of the region and the world."

The Iranian government "must now demonstrate through deeds its peaceful intentions or be held accountable to international standards and international law," he said.

Israeli analysts said the disclosure of the Qom facility's existence reinforces their strongly held suspicions that Iran is working covertly toward building a nuclear weapon, even as it tries to appear open to inspection of some of its facilities.

Israeli leaders consider Iran's nuclear program one of their country's chief external threats and have urged the major powers to impose what Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has described as "crippling sanctions" if diplomacy does not work. Israel has also held out the possibility of military action.

"I can't say I am surprised," said Emily Landau, head of the arms control and regional security program at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University. "There's a sense in the past few days that the concern of the international community has gone up a step. We have seen more determined statements from Sarkozy and Brown. These reports are only going to enhance that trend, so in that sense it locks into the other dynamics to maybe get the necessary determination to get across a firmer message."

The global standoff over Iran's nuclear program began in 2002 with the discovery of two large nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak, with the Natanz facility devoted to uranium enrichment. U.S. intelligence had secretly provided the geographical coordinates of the facilities to the IAEA three months before an Iranian exile group drew attention to them at an August news conference in Washington.

The public exposure led to demands that IAEA inspect the facilities, which it did in 2003, and ultimately to Iran's admission that it had kept its nuclear program hidden for 18 years in violation of an international treaty.

A key question regarding the Qom site is whether Iran violated its obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regarding when it has to inform international authorities of a new nuclear facility. Under the original treaty, such declarations were not required until six months before fuel was introduced into the facility.

In 1992, however, the IAEA board determined that six months was not enough time to organize required inspections, and it amended the rule to require nations to inform it at the time the initial decision was made to build a facility, before construction began. The amendment, called "Code 3.1," was mandatory; Iran and all other signatories agreed to it.

But in 2006, angered over an IAEA decision to refer its case to the U.N. Security Council, Iran said its parliament had decided it would revert to the non-amended treaty and six-month notification.

The IAEA took the position that no country could legally revert to the old system and that Iran and all countries were bound by the new rule.

In his news conference Friday in New York, Ahmadinejad defined Iran's compliance with the IAEA in terms of the former rules. He said the agency must be informed about a new

enrichment facility "six months before it is infused with gas" and that "we still have a year left" before that deadline. He suggested that Iran should be congratulated for informing the IAEA about the Qom plant "18 months ahead of time."

In an interview with The Post earlier this week, Ahmadinejad said he is willing to have Iran's nuclear experts meet with scientists from the United States and other world powers as a confidence-building measure.

Ahmadinejad insisted that Iran is using nuclear technology only for energy and medical purposes and has no interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. He said he wants to buy enriched uranium from the United States that would be used for medical purposes.

The nuclear material Iran is now producing is 3 percent to 5 percent enriched and suitable only for use as fuel in nuclear power plants. Nuclear material for medical purposes must be 20 percent enriched, and purchasing such material would require a waiver of international sanctions. While weapons-grade material is more than 90 percent enriched, an Iranian move to produce its own material for its medical reactor could put the country on the next step toward reaching the ability to make highly enriched uranium, analysts said.

In Tehran Friday, Iranian state television revealed the Sept. 21 letter on its Arabic language news channel, al-Alam, which is often used to transmit important official Iranian foreign policy decisions. The report quoted an unnamed source who described the letter as further evidence of Tehran's transparency in dealing with the IAEA about its nuclear program. It repeated Iran's long-held assertion that it is acquiring nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

On Capitol Hill, House Republican Leader John A. Boehner (Ohio) charged that Iran "is committed to building a nuclear bomb to threaten the United States and our allies," and he denounced the Obama administration's response. "The United States should not participate in direct negotiations with Iran" until it has answers to key questions, he said.

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