

Anything more to declare?

Time for a negotiated end to Iran's nuclear stand-off is running out after the latest discovery of another secret facility.



Illustration by Peter Schrank

Will Iran relent and take steps to build confidence in the claimed peaceful nature of its nuclear work? The United States and three European partners (Britain, France and Germany) have given it until the end of the year to show willing. On October 1st, as *The Economist* went to press, talks were under way in Geneva between Iran and six countries, including America, the three Europeans, Russia and China. But if Iran's aim is compromise, it has a funny way of showing it.

The Geneva meeting is the first with the six in more than a year and the first formal talks in 30 years between America and Iran. Yet Iran's planned opener had been a defiant firework display that culminated on September 28th in the test-firing of its Shahab-3 missile, capable of reaching Israel and beyond.

Unexpected and clearly unwelcome to Iran's fiery president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in New York for meetings of the UN General Assembly, had been the revelation three days earlier by President Barack Obama that American, British and French spies now had irrefutable evidence of a secret uranium-enrichment plant, capable of producing highly enriched uranium for bombs, as well as the low-enriched stuff for civilian reactors. The plant is buried in a mountainside on a military compound near the Iranian city of Qom.

Initially caught off guard, Iranian officials were quickly back on the offensive. They had already informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog, of the Qom plant, they said. In fact, a letter possibly aimed at deflecting pressure ahead of the Geneva talks, but possibly also written in the knowledge that the secret nuclear game at Qom might soon be up, had made cryptic reference to a pilot plant, but with no details of where. Instead of throwing open its doors to inspectors after the news broke, Iran told them they could come only when it was good and ready.

Iran insists it was not obliged to tell the agency of the plant's existence until it was closer to spinning uranium gas through the estimated 3,000 centrifuge machines on site. It says it had

unilaterally repudiated an agreement, signed by others, to let inspectors have early sight of all nuclear plans, to ensure safeguards were built in. Others, including the IAEA's outgoing head, Mohamed ElBaradei, reject that.

Work at Qom appears to have started in secret even before Iran's own legal ploy, and proceeded despite five UN Security Council resolutions telling Iran to stop all work on uranium and plutonium (another bomb ingredient). Mr ElBaradei, who had earlier suggested that Iran's threat had been "hyped", said Iran's actions over Qom put it "on the wrong side of the law".



To Mr Obama, the plant's "size and configuration" are "inconsistent" with peaceful purposes. Its centrifuge machines could produce enough bomb-usable uranium for about a weapon a year. It was built on a military base, says Iran, the better to defend it from air strikes. But if Iran has been duplicating its nuclear effort, expect other hidden sites too.

Over the years since its main enrichment plant at Natanz was discovered, Iran has volunteered little information to inspectors, belatedly owning up, including to past illicit uranium and plutonium work, only when presented with hard evidence. It says its nuclear file is now closed.

For two years it has refused to answer repeated questions about other suspect activities. These include military involvement in nuclear procurement and high-explosive tests staged in ways that could help develop nuclear triggers. Other countries have yet to get a satisfactory explanation as to why Iran had a document on shaping uranium metal into spheres, a trick useful only for making weapons. Meanwhile documents turned up that showed design work to fit a nuclear-weapon-sized object into the nose-cone of a Shahab missile—but Iran dismissed them as forgeries.

Inspectors describe all this information—collected from a variety of governments at different times—as consistent, comprehensive and credible. Yet they still say officially they have no concrete proof of a weapons programme. Others disagree. America's spooks stand by their 2007 assessment that Iran had such a programme, but called a halt in 2003. Britain reportedly

believes the programme restarted in 2004 or 2005. Germany's intelligence service, looking at what Iran has been secretly trying to buy, has no doubt the programme continues. France is equally sure. Israel believes it never stopped.

The six are still offering improved political and trade relations with Iran, talks on regional security and co-operation in civilian nuclear technologies. But first Iran must freeze uranium work at today's level and, if talks progress, suspend its uranium and plutonium effort. Only when inspectors were confident of the peaceful nature of Iran's programme could enrichment resume. Indeed, some sort of enrichment on Iranian soil may be essential to a negotiated deal, argues Mark Fitzpatrick of London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. Iran has also said it would like to buy enriched uranium from abroad.

But such a deal still looks a long way off. Though Iran has been in turmoil since a stolen election in June, there has been no sign that its nuclear programme, controlled directly by Iran's clerical supreme leader, not by its politicians, has paused for breath. Indeed, Iran continues to make nuclear strides that, if reports of weapons-tinkering are true, will soon give it the ability to build a bomb secretly and at speed.

In the wings of the UN General Assembly, the foreign ministers of the six again agreed on a dual-track strategy: engagement if possible, more forceful measures if not. But will Russia and China go along with harsher sanctions than the UN's existing repertoire of wrist-slaps—curbs on companies, banks and the people involved in Iran's nuclear and missile plans?

Iran has long counted on cover from China, with which it has growing commercial ties, and from Russia; both dislike sanctions. Qom may yet change that. But America and the European trio have already started lobbying other governments around the world to slap on harsher sanctions even if the UN Security Council cannot: thoughts have been turning to more bank bans, a bar on investment in Iran's oil and gasfields, keeping its ships from foreign ports, and more. Without a deal, there will be more fireworks to come.

ANYTHING more to declare? **The Economist**, New York, Oct. 1st 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 2 out. 2009.