

Under pressure from Washington, IAEA votes to penalise Iran

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10 March 2007

Amid mounting US military and political threats against Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting in Vienna this week provided another display of political cynicism and cowardice on the part of the so-called international community.

The 35-member IAEA board of governors agreed unanimously on Thursday to penalise Iran for failing to abide by last December's UN Security Council resolution demanding Tehran shut down its uranium enrichment facilities and other nuclear programs. On the recommendation of IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei, 22 of 55 technical aid projects funded by the IAEA will be axed—a punishment only previously imposed on two countries—North Korea and Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

None of the 22 projects even relate to Iran's uranium enrichment program, its heavy water research reactor under construction at Arak or other facilities nominated in the UN resolution. The technical assistance, which is provided to dozens of mainly developing countries, relates strictly to the peaceful use of nuclear energy in medicine, agriculture, waste management, management training and power generation.

As Iran's IAEA ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh pointed out, one of the projects involved the use of radiation to strengthen cables and prevent accidents. "Those who prepared this resolution have ill political motivation, or they don't know what nuclear technology means at all," he said. In the course of the four-day meeting, he reiterated that Iran did not intend to construct nuclear weapons and insisted it would proceed with uranium enrichment, as was its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The representatives of the 35 countries involved, of course, are well informed on nuclear technical matters. They are also well aware of the scant evidence supporting the US claims that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons. Delegates all had copies of a February 22 report prepared by ElBaradei for the UN Security Council on Iran's nuclear programs. The document, which was made public on Wednesday, confirms the obvious—that Iran has not stopped work at its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz or construction on the Arak reactor—but provides no proof of a weapons project.

Just as in the lead-up to the illegal US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the IAEA, under pressure from Washington, is insisting

that Iran prove the impossible: that nowhere in its large territory are there any nuclear weapons projects. Iran's agreement since 2003 to allow more intrusive inspections by IAEA inspectors has led to a stream of accusations fed from US and Israeli intelligence, many of which have turned out to be old, discontinued experiments, false leads, or, in the case of some documents, probably forged.

All this is well known in the IAEA headquarters in Vienna. An article in the British-based *Guardian* on February 22, based on IAEA sources, found that "most of the tip-offs about supposed weapons sites provided by the CIA and other US intelligence agencies have led to dead ends." One diplomat to the IAEA explained: "They gave us a paper with a list of sites. [The inspectors] did some follow-up, they went to some military sites, but there was no sign of [banned nuclear] activities. Now [the inspectors] don't go in blindly. Only if it passes a credibility test."

The *Guardian* highlighted a particularly controversial instance when the CIA provided the IAEA with the printed records of plans for a nuclear warhead, supposedly found on a stolen laptop supplied by an informant inside Iran. Tehran insisted the material was forged and the IAEA has reservations about its authenticity. As one official commented: "First of all, if you have a clandestine program, you don't put it on laptops which can walk away. The data is all in English which may be reasonable for some of the technical matters, but at some point you'd have thought there would be at least some notes in Farsi. So there is some doubt over the provenance of the computer."

ElBaradei's report last month also reflected the lack of evidence. IAEA inspectors verified what Iran had publicly stated: that uranium enrichment and the construction of the Arak reactor were proceeding. At the same time, however, they confirmed that uranium enrichment testing had not exceeded 5 percent enrichment—the level required to fuel nuclear power reactors—and there were no signs of reprocessing activities at the Arak reactor. Neither point was highlighted in the US or international press.

Nor was there any reference to ElBaradei's conclusion that Iran had complied with its obligations under the NPT Safeguards Agreement. "Iran has been providing the Agency [IAEA] with access to declared nuclear material and facilities,

and has provided the required nuclear material accountancy reports in connection with such material and facilities.” The report also verified “the non-diversion of nuclear material in Iran”. That is, Iran’s uranium is fully accounted for and is not being diverted to secret programs.

Nevertheless, ElBaradei continued to bow to the US and its allies and their demands for greater Iranian cooperation with the IAEA and more intrusive inspections. His conclusion that “the Agency is unable to verify the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran” was highlighted in the American media and was exactly what the Bush administration wanted. As was evident in Iraq, the UN weapons inspection to verify “the absence” of illegitimate activities is a never-ending process, which the US exploited as a pretext for its 2003 war.

The IAEA’s focus on Iran is riddled with contradictions. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, drawn up in 1968, not only sought to ensure that nations such as Iran would not build nuclear weapons. The nuclear-armed powers were also supposed to progressively destroy their nuclear arsenals.

Not only has the US failed to do that, but the Bush administration is building a new generation of atomic warheads. Moreover, US Congress recently ratified a deal with India, allowing it to keep its nuclear bombs, first tested in 1998, while obtaining access to uranium and nuclear technology. Meanwhile, close US ally Israel is under no pressure to sign the NPT or to dismantle its stockpile of nuclear weapons.

Like the United Nations itself, the IAEA is no disinterested neutral body devoted to peace and disarmament. It is a clearing-house for the major powers to thrash out their competing interests. The decision on Thursday to cut technical aid to Iran was taken in an atmosphere thoroughly permeated with cynicism and hypocrisy. All the representatives present were conscious of what was at stake. France, Britain and Germany—and thus the European Union—have decided that their best strategy is to back US demands for Iran to shut down its nuclear programs, while attempting to defend their considerable economic interests in Iran and encouraging Tehran to reach a compromise deal to avoid military conflict.

China and Russia, which could have vetoed last December’s UN resolution, voted for sanctions against Iran. Both have been engaged in talks over the past fortnight with other permanent members of the UN Security Council—that is, the US, Britain and France—and Germany over Washington’s demand for a second UN resolution and tougher sanctions. Beijing and Moscow are resisting measures that would cut across their own economic ties with Iran and have opposed military action. Yet, neither has publicly challenged the pretexts being prepared by the Bush administration for war against Iran. Needless to say, both acceded to the IAEA decision on Thursday to further penalise Iran.

The 35 countries currently on the IAEA board of governors include a number that the Bush administration can count on as handraisers for its resolutions. It is no shock that Australia and

Japan, which have been an active participants in the Bush administration’s crimes in Iraq, backed the decision, or that countries such as Thailand, Norway, Greece, Canada and Indonesia decided to acquiesce for various reasons over an issue that did not directly affect their vital interests.

It might come as a surprise, however, that the leftist governments of Cuba, Brazil, Bolivia and Chile, as well as all the Middle Eastern countries, including Iran’s ally Syria, joined the “consensus” on the resolution. Of course, it was not done without a small protest. The Arab countries sent a letter to the IAEA demanding that Israel accede to the NPT and pointing to the hypocrisy of penalising Iran, while allowing Israel to retain its nuclear arsenal. But then all the Arab countries present at the meeting, including Syria, supported IAEA decision.

On behalf of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), Cuba read a statement appealing for “patience and restraint” from all parties and opposing a military attack on Iran. The IAEA’s Technical Cooperation Program, it declared, “should not be used as a tool by any of the Board members for political purposes”. Nonetheless, all NAM members agreed to cut IAEA technical cooperation with Iran.

The Bush administration simply ignored the feeble protests. After all, it got what it wanted—one more declaration that Iran was flouting the will of the “international community” by refusing to shut down its uranium enrichment program. As far as the White House is concerned, Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program is simply one of a number of pretexts being prepared as the basis for war. As the US amasses its naval armada in the Persian Gulf, the IAEA resolution is more “proof” that Iran is “defying international opinion” and constitutes “a threat to world peace”.

The Bush administration’s real aim in preparing a confrontation with Iran is not over its nuclear programs. Unlike its European and Asian rivals, Washington has had no economic or diplomatic relations with Tehran since the overthrow of its ally Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979. President Bush is now threatening war against Iran as the means of reasserting a dominant role in a country that is strategically placed between the Middle East and Central Asia and has huge oil and gas reserves of its own. Once again, the US is using its military might to offset its waning economic influence.



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