

Iran makes significant concession to defuse nuclear standoff

Peter Symonds
22 October 2009

After three days of haggling in Vienna, a draft agreement was finalised yesterday to ship the bulk of Iran's low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for further enrichment and processing into fuel for its research reactor in Tehran. The talks conducted under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) involved the US, Russia, France and Iran.

The deal, which is to be ratified by all parties by Friday, is a significant concession on the part of Iran, which has previously insisted on producing its own nuclear fuel. By allowing the export of most of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, Tehran has underscored its repeated statements that it is not intending to build nuclear weapons.

According to the latest IAEA figures, Iran has produced 1.5 tonnes of uranium enriched to a level of about 4 percent. Enrichment to around 90 percent is required to manufacture weapons-grade material. The US and international media seized on the stockpile to declare that Iran had enough enriched uranium to build a bomb. In fact, Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its stockpile of enriched uranium is closely monitored by IAEA inspectors.

Details of the Vienna agreement have not been released. However, the arrangement reportedly involves exporting 1.2 tonnes of low-enriched uranium by the end of the year. This would be further enriched by Russia to 20 percent then transformed into the uranium-aluminium alloy plates needed for the Tehran reactor, which produces medical isotopes. In such a form, neither the fuel nor the end products produced by the reactor could be easily used for other purposes. Most estimates indicate that Iran would require at least a year to replenish its stockpile.

The deal follows weeks of bullying of Tehran by the US and its European allies, including the threat of drastic new sanctions aimed at crippling the Iranian economy. At last

month's G-20 summit, US President Obama, along with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, melodramatically revealed that Iran had a "secret" uranium processing plant near the city of Qom and warned of punitive measures. Tehran had informed the IAEA four days previously of the existence of the unfinished plant.

The announcement, which was accompanied by an intensive campaign in the international media, was designed to pressure not only Iran, but Russia and China, which have been reluctant to agree to new UN penalties, prior to negotiations in Geneva on October 1. These talks between the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—resulted in two concrete steps: an agreement in principle to export Iran's low-enriched uranium, and IAEA inspection of the Qom plant, which is due to take place on October 25.

The meeting in Vienna to thrash out the technical aspects of the export deal was accompanied by constant accusations in the US media of Iran's untrustworthiness and unwillingness to go through with the arrangement. Tehran also indulged in a degree of posturing, insisting that it would not give up uranium enrichment and objecting to France being a party to the agreement, on the grounds that it could not be relied on. In the end, it appears that Russia will be the main party to the contract, with aspects of the fuel rod production sub-contracted to France.

The underlying standoff over Iran's uranium enrichment, even to low levels, which was not the subject of discussion in Vienna, remains unresolved. The US has already pushed three sets of sanctions through the UN Security Council, demanding that Iran halt all uranium enrichment. Tehran has condemned the UN resolutions as illegal, pointing out that it has the right under the NPT to conduct all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, for peaceful purposes, including uranium enrichment. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in particular,

has whipped up nationalist sentiment at home by insisting on Iran's rights against the major powers and boasting of its nuclear achievements.

Abolfazl Zohrahvand, a senior aide to Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, hinted on Monday at a possible compromise on the broader issue. "The current proposal is for enrichment to be done on our territory while only enrichment above 5 percent, in particular for the research reactor in Tehran, will be done in another country," he said. Zohrahvand indicated, however, that Iran might be willing to extend the present one-off arrangement with Russia to Iran's future needs for enriched uranium above the 5 percent level. To date, however, the US has insisted on an end to all enrichment inside Iran.

IAEA director Mohammed ElBaradei was upbeat yesterday, describing the draft agreement as "a very important confidence-building measure that can defuse a crisis that has been going on for a number of years". He continued: "I very much hope that people see the big picture, see that this agreement could open the way for a complete normalisation of relations between Iran and the international community."

At this stage, however, all the concessions have been on Iran's side. Tehran is obviously hoping for reciprocal moves by the US and its allies to end the country's diplomatic isolation and remove existing economic sanctions that have impacted particularly on its banking and finance sector and inhibited much-needed investment to upgrade its oil and gas infrastructure. The top Iranian and US negotiators—Iran's IAEA representative Ali Ashghar Soltanieh and US Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel Poneman—met privately on Tuesday to discuss details of the plan.

According to *Time* magazine, the proposal had been under discussion since June when Iran approached the IAEA to find a source to supply new fuel for the Tehran reactor. The Obama administration sounded out Russia on the idea of processing Iran's enriched uranium in early July and the plan was put to Iran via the IAEA in mid-September. The arrangement was confirmed late last month when Obama met Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in New York during the UN General Assembly session.

There has, however, been no let up in the pressure on Iran from Washington. Following yesterday's announcement, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cautiously declared that while the agreement was a "constructive beginning", it "needs to be followed by constructive actions". She warned:

"The door is open to a better future for Iran, but the process of engagement cannot be open-ended. We are not prepared to talk just for the sake of talking."

Clinton's menacing remarks have been a constant refrain of the Obama administration: if Iran does not meet US demands and deadlines, drastic punitive measures will follow. Any refusal on Tehran's part will be exploited by Washington to step up the pressure on China and Russia to agree to new UN sanctions or to justify unilateral action by the US and its allies.

For its part, Washington will not be bound by any arrangement with Iran. Previous US agreements with North Korea can be taken as a guideline. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations reneged on key US undertakings to Pyongyang, leading to the ongoing crisis over its nuclear programs. Likewise, any deal with Iran can be undone easily by US provocations, especially as Washington is publicly committed to nothing to date.

The continuing tensions only underscore the fact that the US is exploiting the nuclear issue as a pretext to press ahead with its broader ambitions for economic and strategic dominance in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Following Iran's presidential elections in June, the US mounted an extraordinary campaign to exploit opposition protests in support of losing candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in a bid to refashion a regime in Tehran more amenable to its interests.

The Obama administration has been trying to use Iran's nuclear programs for similar purposes. Whether an agreement is reached over the nuclear issue is dependent on Tehran's willingness to serve US broader interests in the region, particularly in assisting to stabilise the US-led occupations in neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact