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Update on Iran Nuclear Issue

Robert Joseph, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security

Foreign Press Center Briefing
Washington, DC
September 6, 2006

11:10 A.M. EDT

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MODERATOR: Thank you. Good morning and welcome to the Foreign Press Center. This morning we have Under Secretary Robert Joseph, who is briefing today on Iran's nuclear program. He'll open with a short statement and then be happy to take your questions.

The Under Secretary has a very limited time and so if you can make your questions succinct, we'll get more in. Thank you.

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Good morning. I'd like to open with four points and then simply take your questions.

First, a nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable, not just to the United States but to the entire international community. With nuclear weapons, Tehran would be even more aggressive in its support for terror and its subversion of peace and stability in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region. With nuclear weapons, Tehran could light a fuse for further nuclear proliferation by those countries that would be threatened by Iran, bringing into question the effectiveness and in fact the future of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. And with nuclear weapons, Iran would be an even greater threat to the state of Israel, a threat to its very existence.

Second, Iran is continuing its nuclear program, as you know, in defiance of the IAEA Board and the United Nations



Security Council. For 18 years, Iran pursued a covert, deceptive program to develop sensitive nuclear technologies that will provide it access to highly enriched uranium and plutonium, the two sources of fissile material for nuclear weapons. After the program was exposed in the fall of 2002, the IAEA began an almost three-year investigation of Iran's concealment and false denial of its activities. The IAEA Director General, Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, and the IAEA Board have found that Iran has repeatedly failed to live up to its commitments under its safeguards agreement and has failed to cooperate with the IAEA investigation in key areas.

Last week's latest report of the Director General confirms that Iran is continuing its uranium enrichment activities in defiance of the IAEA Board and the Security Council. The Iranians are feeding uranium hexafluoride into the 164-centrifuge cascade and they're producing enriched uranium. A second 164-machine cascade is being installed and the Iranians have declared that they intend to go operational next month, a 164-machine being the key building block of the A. Q. Khan approach to enriching uranium for weapons.

Construction of a heavy water reactor continues. Iran continues to convert large quantities of uranium into uranium hexafluoride, the feedstock for centrifuges. Iran continues to deny the IAEA access to facilities, to individuals and to documents necessary to conduct the investigation. The many questions that have been raised by Iran's nuclear program have simply not been resolved, and the bottom line is that the IAEA is unable to confirm the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program.

Third, we have and are continuing to pursue a diplomatic approach to stopping Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. In June, following over two years of attempts by the EU-3 to find a negotiated outcome with Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China offered a package of incentives, including extensive cooperation in the civil nuclear area. This is the choice that Iran should have made. This is the choice that would be of greatest benefit to the Iranian people. It is not the choice that Iran has made.

In July, the UN Security Council made clear the conditions Iran must meet regarding its nuclear program, and that is the need, the demand, to suspend its uranium enrichment activities and to cooperate fully with the IAEA. To date, there is simply no indication that Iran will change course and choose cooperation. Iran's official statements, and most importantly its activities on the ground, clearly indicate a different choice, the choice of continued defiance of the IAEA, the Security Council and the international community.

UN Security Council Resolution 1696 expresses the Security Council's intention to adopt appropriate measures under Article 41 of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter if Iran does not suspend all enrichment-related activities by August 31st. That deadline, as you know, has now passed and since Iran has not taken the steps required by the IAEA and the Security Council, it is now essential that we move to adopt sanctions against Iran. We are in discussions with members of the Security Council. Under Secretary Burns will leave this evening for a meeting with the P-5, plus Germany, political directors tomorrow. We have not given up on diplomacy. Sanctions represent the next step in our diplomacy, as the United States continues to work with others to persuade Iran to change its course and abandon its nuclear weapons program.

Fourth, this is not about the right of states to peaceful nuclear technology. We recognize the right of all nations to civilian nuclear energy provided they meet their NPT obligations and not pursue nuclear weapons. The IAEA and the Security Council have both concluded that Iran's covert activities, its repeated breaches of its safeguards obligations, and its failure to cooperate fully with the IAEA have led to a lack of confidence by the international community with respect to Iran's nuclear intentions.

Iran's claim that it must develop now the technology to produce fuel for reactors that won't be built for at least another decade is simply untenable. The IAEA and the Security Council have both decided that the first step, the next required step, is for Iran to suspend all enrichment-related activities. That would allow negotiations to proceed on a long-term solution of this critically important problem.

Thank you. Let me take your questions.

MODERATOR: If you'd wait for the microphone and state your name and organization. Andrei.

QUESTION: Thanks. My name is Andrei Sitov. I'm with TASS, the Russian news agency. I'm sure you'll be asked the big questions about what the sanctions will be, but I have a couple of parochial but important for my country questions. The first among them is the sanctions that were imposed on the Russian companies on the basis of Iran Nonproliferation Act. Secretary Rumsfeld recently suggested in Alaska that the question can be revisited. Have you revisited the question since then? Do you plan to do so? What do you expect on that revision? And also a technical question: How close, in your opinion, is Iran to obtaining a nuclear weapon?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: First, with regard to the sanctions imposed on the two Russian companies, those sanctions were imposed because of the material assistance that those companies provided to Iran. In both cases I believe it was for Iran's missile program, and under U.S. law those sanctions were imposed. There is no reassessment specifically focused on the decision to impose sanctions on those two companies, but we always have continuing assessments of transactions between entities and individuals and Iran's WMD and missile programs as we do with other states of proliferation concern.

What was your third question?

QUESTION: How close.

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: How close. How close is always a very difficult question to answer because it's unclear exactly what the question means. Is it how close to having a nuclear weapon? Is it how close to having the fissile material for a nuclear weapon, which of course is the most difficult aspect of gaining access to a nuclear weapons capability? Is it how close to gaining the knowledge and the experience that is necessary to acquire plutonium or in the case of highly enriched uranium to run the centrifuges, to run the cascades on a sustained basis?

QUESTION: An actual weapon.

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: An actual weapon? I mean, it of course is going to depend on the first two. I mean, this is a sequence. One has to acquire the technical expertise and the knowledge to move to the development and then the production of fissile material and then weaponization. Now weaponization can be done in parallel with the first two steps and in fact there has been indications of weaponization on the part of Iran.

The intelligence community assesses -- and this has been made public -- that it will be the end of the decade, the first part of the next decade, before Iran actually has a nuclear weapon. My sense is that if we are talking about stopping Iran from

acquiring a nuclear weapon, we have to be able to stop them from acquiring the expertise, acquiring the technologies that will lead them to a nuclear weapons capability. Because once they're able to operate centrifuges -- 164-machine centrifuges -- in cascades and feed uranium hexafluoride into those centrifuges in the cascade and run those cascades over a sustained period of time, they will be able to acquire a nuclear weapon without us knowing about it.

Yes, sir.

QUESTION: I'm Steve Collison with AFP. There was a report, a congressional intelligence report, last month that suggested that the U.S. intelligence community didn't have the expertise or the ability to penetrate into Iran to assess accurately the extent to which its nuclear program is going ahead. Are you, first, confident that you have the ability to judge exactly where Iran is?

And secondly, assuming a sanctions regime is in place and it fails to deter Iran, is there going to come a time in the next couple of years where President Bush is presented with the option of either taking some kind of action militarily to stop it or to kind of counteract the fact that Iran is going to go nuclear?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: In terms of intelligence, I obviously can't comment on intelligence operations or intelligence assessments that are classified. But I can say that, based on the information that is made public through the IAEA reports and investigations, it's very clear where Iran is going in terms of its development of the capability to produce fissile material. The very brief report that was provided to the Security Council on the 31st of last month makes clear that they're moving forward. They're moving forward very aggressively. The Iranians have said that they want to have 3,000 centrifuges in place by the end of the year at Natanz. This is a large number of centrifuges that will produce a large quantity of highly enriched uranium.

There are things that we do not know about the Iranian program because of the restrictions on the IAEA. For example, there are many questions that have been raised by the connection of Iran's nuclear program with Iran's military. This is very disturbing, but it is just one of a number of very disturbing indicators that we have that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability.

In terms of sanctions, well, sanctions are the next step. Sanctions are what you do next in terms of the diplomatic approach. Iran must understand that there are consequences for its defiance of the IAEA Board and for its defiance of the Security Council. The Security Council demanded that they suspend these activities and they have not done so. And as the President said, now there must be costs; there must be costs imposed on Iran. And we are in consultations with others about the nature of those sanctions. But we are determined to move forward in a way that will impose those costs perhaps in a graduated fashion, perhaps starting with a targeted set of sanctions on WMD and missile programs. But again, we are in consultations and we're moving that forward.

QUESTION: Umit Enginsoy with Turkey's NTV Television. Mr. Secretary, Turkey has considerable economic and other ties with its neighbor Iran and at the same time is a close ally of the United States. How do you expect Turkey to behave in the face of the growing Iranian threat? What's Turkey's (inaudible)?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Well, Turkey is of course a friend and close ally of the United States. Turkey is a very important country in the region along with other states.

The next step is for the Security Council to move to adopt those appropriate measures that they declared in the Security Council Resolution 1696 and those appropriate measures under Chapter 7, Article 41 of Chapter 7, would be sanctions and we would trust that all responsible states will observe those sanctions. And as we ratchet up those sanctions, if that's the approach that we take, we would anticipate that all states who are responsible, and Turkey is certainly one of those states, would comply with UN Security Council resolutions. That's the system that we have. That's the next step.

QUESTION: Mikhail Solodovnikov, RTR Russian television. Do you believe there is still room for direct dialogue between the United States and Iran and do you know if there were any officials that met the ex-President Khatami who is in Washington right now?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Well, the ex-President is not here as a guest of the United States Government. He has been invited by private groups and individuals. I am not aware of any discussions and quite frankly I don't think that now is the time for direct dialogue with Iran. We have made clear that if Iran does suspend its enrichment activities we are willing to join with the other members of the P-5 and Germany to sit down and talk about the incentives package because it is key that we resolve, that we address, the nuclear issue. Iran is, I think, under no misunderstanding with regard to our views on its sponsorship of terrorism, its unwillingness to provide even the basic fundamentals of human rights with regard to its own population. There are many, many problems that we have with Iran that are clear to both the United States and Iran at this point.

QUESTION: Joyce Karam with al-Hayat newspaper. My question is regarding the sanctions and with Russia they are threatening to have sanctions under Chapter 7. How are you going to go in line with that?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Well, Russia of course voted in favor of the Security Council resolution that I have cited, which does express the intent if Iran fails to meet the deadline that was established for a suspension of its enrichment and reprocessing activities, to move forward with appropriate measures, and those appropriate measures are clearly sanctions. And so we're in consultations with Russia and the other countries involved to move in that direction.

QUESTION: Can I have a follow-up? Thank you. Yasmin Congar of Milliyet/CNN Turk and to follow up the last question. Since Russians have indicated that they would be open to sanctions provided that those sanctions are not extended to military -- the military methods, would the U.S. consider a sanctions regime that would make it clear to the Iranians that a military option is not going to be taken into consideration? And secondly, what do you expect the Chinese to do?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Well, I think China, like Russia and the other states that voted for the resolution, will support what is called for in the resolution. In terms of military options, we are of course putting an emphasis on resolving this issue through diplomacy. We have supported the EU-3 process in terms of seeking a diplomatic outcome to this. We have worked very diligently in the IAEA Board to move this forward through the Board, finding Iran in violation of its safeguards obligations and sending the issue to Security Council, and once at the Security Council we have played a leadership role in moving this this past summer forward and we will continue to do that. One never takes options off the table, but what this is about is it's about diplomacy and making sure that we do everything that we can to ensure the success of a peaceful diplomatic outcome, and that's what we're doing.

MODERATOR: I have a question in New York, if you would go ahead.

QUESTION: Mark Seddon, United Nations correspondent Al Jazeera International. Do you have any evidence that North Korea may be supplying Iran with nuclear technology? And also, which countries have and are supplying Iran with nuclear technology? And finally, is it not perhaps time to reinvigorate the Nonproliferation Treaty to cover all countries that are engaged in nuclear weapons programs?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Again, I can't get into issues of intelligence but I can say that the connections between North Korea and Iran are very strong. There have been a number of revelations that have been made in public about the connection, particularly in the area of ballistic missiles. And North Korea has been, I think, the principal supplier to Iran of ballistic missile technologies. I can't comment on the connections in the nuclear area with North Korea.

In terms of where Iran gets its nuclear technology, it gets it from all over. Iran has a very sophisticated and very capable network of -- to acquire these sensitive technologies. We are doing everything that we can to block the transfer of those technologies into Iran. We're working with Russia, we're working with China, we're working with the Europeans, we're working with a number of states in Asia that are the sources of this technology to ensure that they have appropriate export controls, that those controls are effectively implemented.

And we're also working a second track and that is the track of actively trying to disrupt the trade in proliferation. And some of that focus, a great deal of that focus in fact, has been on denying Iran the ability to import sensitive technologies for its WMD and missile programs and we've had a significant degree of success in the context of the Proliferation Security Initiative, which now involves the participation of over 80 countries.

MODERATOR: Barry.

QUESTION: Barry Schweid, AP.

MODERATOR: Could you wait for the mike, please?

QUESTION: Could you please elaborate a bit on your confidence that China and everyone else will vote for sanctions? Is it based on the fact that they voted for them already or because they are saying other things publicly -- more diplomacy, et cetera, even the Europeans? Or have they been persuaded in diplomacy, in diplomatic efforts, over the last week or two? Why are you confident that you'll get the votes that really the reason they're expected because of their support for the resolution? Is it just that?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Well, I think it's very important when a country like Russia or China sponsors or supports a resolution. That is going to have an impact on their decision making in terms of implementation.

We don't see at all a contradiction between the imposition of sanctions and diplomacy. This is, as I said in my opening remarks, the next step in diplomacy. This is what the process calls for. This is the structure that we have in terms of the IAEA and the UN Security Council.

And so we are continuing to pursue very aggressively our diplomatic effort. None of this is easy. There will be, I think, consultations over the course of the next week or more about the nature of sanctions. There's a lot that we have to discuss. There's a lot that is not yet agreed. But the fundamental bargain has been struck and that bargain is reflected in

the Security Council resolution from 31 July. And that does say that the intention is to move to appropriate measures under Chapter 7, Article 41, if Iran doesn't meet the deadline. Iran didn't meet the deadline; that's where we are now.

QUESTION: Secretary Joseph, Faiz Rehman from Voice of America. And my question is regarding that region. Pakistan is an important U.S. ally and it also has a long border with Iran. Are the Pakistanis on board on this issue, number one? Number two, Pakistan having already strained relations with India on the other side and then Afghanistan near troubled borders, do you think Pakistan could afford to have anywhere kind of a bad relationship on the borders?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Pakistan is of course a friend and strategic ally and we would anticipate Pakistan taking those measures that, as I said before, all responsible governments will need to take as the Security Council moves forward and adopts sanctions on Iran. So yes, I would anticipate that they would be supportive.

MODERATOR: Yes, sir, right there.

QUESTION: Michel Gandour, Al Hurra. Do you expect (inaudible) this month on a new resolution?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Again, this is going to take time. It's going to take a great deal of effort. It's hard for me to give you a timeframe on this. My own personal assessment would be yes.

MODERATOR: One last question. Yes, sir.

QUESTION: James Rosen, Fox News.

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: James.

QUESTION: The Foreign Minister of Iran said on television today that a "short time suspension" of uranium enrichment is on the meeting agenda for Mssrs. Larijani and Solana. What is the U.S. view of a short time suspension of uranium by the Iranians? Would that be something the U.S. would regard as productive? And was there a timeframe in mind when the U. S. and the United Nations Security Council more broadly demanded a suspension of uranium? Was (inaudible) indefinite (inaudible)?

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Iran has been playing for time, and I would say quite successfully, for the last three years. We've seen this in the context of the process of moving this through the IAEA. We've seen it in the context of their insincere negotiations with the European 3. We've seen it now in the context of the Security Council resolution and I think we even see it today in the context of their postponement of the meeting between Mr. Solana and Mr. Larijani.

We cannot allow Iran to have more time to pursue its nuclear program. Part of its strategy has been to change the reality on the ground. We certainly saw this last April when they made their announcement that they had actually enriched uranium. We've seen it since in a number of different contexts. We are not, for our part, going to fall into the trap of short-term pauses and then resumption to be followed by short-term pauses. We need to resolve this in a way that Iran stops its movement to acquire enrichment capabilities.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH: Thank you all.



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