

IRAN REPEATS CLAIM RESEARCH REACTOR FUEL PLATES OBJECT OF ENRICHMENT AS IAEA VISIT COULD BE EXTENDED

It has generally been viewed as a positive development that Iran has agreed to new visits from the IAEA to help ease the tension surrounding its nuclear program. Especially encouraging is a report in the New York Times this morning that Iran has asked the IAEA to extend the current visit that is underway:

Iran's foreign minister was reported on Monday to have offered to extend a three-day visit to his country by United Nations inspectors in what seemed a further attempt to lower the strident tone of a crisis with the West over Tehran's nuclear program following the imposition of new economic sanctions.

But the Times moved quickly to caveats on this potential good news. The next paragraph:

But it was not clear whether the offer was part of what European officials have termed efforts by Tehran to buy time while continuing uranium enrichment. Iran says the nuclear program is for peaceful purposes while Western leaders say Tehran is seeking to build nuclear weapons.

One key development the Times misses in this coverage is an announcement relating to the use of the uranium enriched to 20%, which has been at the heart of the current disagreements. Fars News reports today that Iran is putting the

finishing touches on nuclear fuel plates for a research reactor that produces medical isotopes. Iran has claimed all along that the 20% enriched uranium was needed to produce new fuel plates for this reactor. Fabrication and installation of these plates would preclude the uranium in those plates being further enriched to weapons grade. From Fars News:

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi stressed the country's ability to convert enriched uranium into fuel plates to supply fuel for the Tehran research reactor, saying the first consignment of 20-percent enriched fuel for the reactor will be ready in the coming months.

/snip/

Late in October, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi had said "around 70 kilograms of (20-percent-enriched) uranium had been produced in Iran" by then, according to the latest inventory report he had seen, dating from September.

In June, Iran's permanent representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Ali Asqar Soltaniyeh said that Iran had produced over 50 kg of 20-percent-enriched uranium till then.

Soltaniyeh said that "we need 120 kg of enrichment up to 20 percent ... for the Tehran reactor".

The Times article informs us that weapons experts are part of the IAEA delegation visiting Iran:

The I.A.E.A. delegation includes two senior weapons experts, Jacques Baute of France and Neville Whiting of South Africa, The A.P. said, implying that Iran may be prepared to discuss allegations that it seeks the ability to

make nuclear warheads.

One would think that the key activity in this IAEA visit will be to carry out an accounting of the 20% enriched uranium that has been produced. The IAEA already has an estimate of the number of enrichment centrifuges that Iran possesses, as well as an estimate for their production efficiency. Should Iran share with these experts verifiable documentation that the 20% enriched uranium produced to date has indeed been fabricated into fuel plates for the Tehran research reactor, then it will be necessary to change the projected date for when Iran could have a functional nuclear weapon. Current projections for when a weapon would be available rely on diversion of all of the 20% enriched uranium into enrichment to weapons grade of 90%+. As far as is known, Iran has not yet demonstrated that it can enrich from 20% to weapons grade.

It appears that Iran is signaling a willingness to be open with the IAEA inspectors. From IRNA:

Asked to comment on the current visit to Iran of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, Salehi said he was optimistic towards the visit and noted that the three-day stay of the inspectors could be extended upon their request.

Another key sign that Iran may be moving toward better relations with the IAEA is this Mehr News article where Iran says that the IAEA will not release identification information on the scientists it interviews:

MP Hossein Naqavi has said that Iran has received assurance from the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors who recently arrived in Iran that they would not leak information on Iranian nuclear scientists' particulars.

"When the delegation wanted to enter our

country, the Islamic Republic decided to use its rights. We set conditions for the inspectors and obtained assurance from them because we had seen that inspections were carried out, and (then) our nuclear scientists were assassinated," Naqavi, who is a member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, told the Persian service of the Fars News Agency on Sunday.

So with Iran signaling it could extend the IAEA visit and saying they don't believe the IAEA will identify its scientists to potential assassins, the current meetings could all come down to the math. If Iran can provide documentation for the amount of 20% enriched uranium produced and for its conversion into research reactor fuel plates, Western countries accusing Iran of seeking to produce a nuclear weapon in the near term will have to change the nature of their accusations. They will either have to move the date for which Iran could have a nuclear weapon into the future by more than a year or they will have to accuse Iran of having additional uranium enrichment capacity beyond that which is known.

On the other hand, should Iran only provide documentation for the fate of just a small fraction of the known production capacity for 20% enriched uranium, then Western pro-war factions will have perhaps their most credible argument to date for Iranian intentions to build a nuclear weapon.