

AMANO: AGREEMENT WITH IRAN REACHED, "WILL BE SIGNED QUITE SOON"

It appears that the hopeful signals being sent out by Iran yesterday ahead of the visit by IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano have been followed through. Speaking to reporters after his return to Vienna this morning, Amano announced that Iran and the IAEA have reached agreement on how to move forward on inspection of Iran's nuclear activities.

Of particular importance, Amano describes the agreement as part of a structured approach, which seems to fit Iran's insistence that any agreement would lay out in advance the framework for how and where inspections are to take place. From Bloomberg:

"There was an important development on the structured approach document on which we have been working since January," IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano said today in Vienna after returning from Tehran, where the deal was reached yesterday. "The decision was made to conclude and sign an agreement."

The accord will be signed "quite soon," Amano told journalists, without giving a date or details. The agreement comes as negotiators head to Baghdad for a second round of negotiations tomorrow over Iran's nuclear program.

The New York Times has more key details, including the fact that inspection of the Parchin facility will be part of the agreement:

Mr. Amano's visit to Tehran on Monday was his first to Iran since his appointment in 2009. Mr. Amano's trip

here, announced unexpectedly on Friday, was part of what diplomats in Vienna called an effort centered on persuading Iran to allow inspections of a site the agency suspects has been used for secret tests for triggering mechanisms that could be used in a nuclear weapon. Iranian officials have ridiculed those suspicions and contended that the site, called Parchin, was sufficiently inspected by the agency in 2005.

Diplomats in Vienna said an investigation of the Parchin site was “not the only game in town” in the negotiations on the so-called structured approach.”

Asked about the Parchin site specifically, Mr. Amano said: “I have raised this issue of access to Parchin and this issue will be addressed as a point of the implementation of the structured approach document.”

Significantly, the suggestions that Iran has attempted to clean the Parchin site have not made it into any of the articles I have seen announcing this agreement. Note that in the Times article above, there is reference to the IAEA suspecting that trigger work has been carried out there, but that Iran had ridiculed those suggestions. That is a bit inaccurate, as the ridicule from Iran has been directed at the suggestion that Iran was trying to wash away evidence of trigger work carried out with uranium present in the experiments with explosives. As I pointed out, such work would have resulted in neutron activation making the entire steel tank radioactive in a way such that it could not be cleaned by scrubbing its surface. It also seems significant that the “diplomats in Vienna” cited by the Times now seem to be downplaying the significance of Parchin.

One of the biggest instigators of the Parchin

issue has been the AP's George Jahn, who released a cartoon drawing of a tank earlier this month. Marcy compared this to Colin Powell's infamous vial of anthrax and other falsified "intelligence". In his article this morning about the agreement, Jahn also refrained from returning to the accusation of cleaning the Parchin site.

Jahn does paint the US a skeptical of Iran's willingness to cooperate:

Western diplomats are skeptical of Iran's willingness to open past and present activities to full perusal, believing it would only reveal what they suspect and Tehran denies – that the Islamic Republic has researched and developed components of a nuclear weapons program. They say that Tehran's readiness to honor any agreement it has signed is the true test of its willingness to cooperate

The United States is among those skeptics. In a statement released soon after Amano's announcement, Robert A. Wood, America's chief delegate to the nuclear agency, said Washington appreciated Amano's efforts but remained "concerned by the urgent obligation for Iran to take concrete steps to cooperate fully with the verification efforts of the IAEA, based on IAEA verification practices."

" We urge Iran to take this opportunity to resolve all outstanding concerns about the nature of its nuclear program," said the statement. "Full and transparent cooperation with the IAEA is the first logical step."

And the US Senate is of course moving in the opposite direction of negotiations, passing a bill on Monday calling for even tougher economic sanctions on Iran's oil industry.

It is widely believed at this point that the agreement between the IAEA and Iran on inspections has set the stage for the P5+1 talks in Baghdad tomorrow to lead to an agreement in which Iran will stop enrichment of uranium to 20% and confine itself to low-grade enrichment to 3.5%. Such an agreement would defuse tensions significantly, especially if the West responds by loosening the sanctions on Iranian oil.

At this point, cautious optimism might actually be escalating to moderate optimism.