

DESPITE PROGRESS ON IRAN-IAEA TALKS, US ENVOY EMPHASIZES WAR PLANS

Both Bloomberg and the AP's George Jahn reported yesterday that the second session of talks in Vienna between the IAEA and Iran produced progress and that additional talks are now scheduled for May 21 in Vienna. But don't look for news of this progress in the New York Times, because it's not there. And don't look for statements from the US praising the progress (although China did praise it) and urging further progress at Monday's talks in Vienna or the P5+1 talks later in the week in Baghdad. Instead, US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro chose to emphasize in an interview on Army Radio in Israel that US plans for war with Iran are ready to be put into action.

First, the good news on the progress. From Bloomberg:

Iran and International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors extended a round of negotiations over the Persian Gulf nation's suspected nuclear-weapon work after both sides said progress had been made.

IAEA inspectors will meet again with their Iranian counterparts on May 21 in Vienna. They ended today two days of talks in the Austrian capital.

"We discussed a number of options to take the agency verification process forward," IAEA chief inspector Herman Nackaerts told reporters. "We had a good exchange of views."

/snip/

"We had fruitful discussions in a very conducive environment," Iran's IAEA

Ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh said.

"We have had progress."

More details on the progress are reported by Mehr News:

Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency have agreed to develop a modality for further cooperation, the Mehr News Agency has learnt.

The responsibilities and commitments of each side will be determined by the modality and the measures necessary will be taken based on the agreement.

In his report on the progress of negotiations, George Jahn couldn't resist a partial reprise of his report over the weekend in which he breathlessly released a cartoon purporting to depict an explosives chamber where nebulous "Western diplomats" have leaked to Jahn that work to develop an explosive neutron trigger for an atomic bomb has been carried out. In an interesting development, Jahn has put a new accusation into this scenario. On Tuesday, I pointed out that if the accused work has been carried out in the chamber, then the steel walls of the chamber will be radioactive due to neutron activation and that this radioactivity will be dispersed throughout the entire thickness of the steel. That means the chamber cannot have its radioactivity removed by the cleaning process claimed by David Albright:

The process could involve grinding down the surfaces inside the building, collecting the dust and then washing the area thoroughly. This could be followed with new building materials and paint. It could also involve removing any dirt around the building thought to contain contaminants.

Jahn now allows for the possibility that Iran could not leave a chamber that is radioactive

due to neutron activation in the building for an IAEA inspection:

Some fear that Iran may even dismantle the explosives containment chamber believed to be inside the suspect building, taking it out in small pieces, if given enough time.

Why has Jahn's language evolved from "scrubbing" the chamber to removing it? Was it this sentence in my post:

On the other hand, should Iran remove the chamber, then that would be suggestive that they were unable to remove neutron activation evidence and thus unable to hide evidence of trigger research.

At any rate, given the apparent progress in negotiations, it is difficult to overstate the irresponsibility of US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro's statements on Tuesday and aired today on Army Radio in Israel:

"It would be preferable to resolve this diplomatically and through the use of pressure than to use military force," Ambassador Dan Shapiro said in remarks about Iran aired by Israel's Army Radio on Thursday.

"But that doesn't mean that option is not fully available – not just available, but it's ready. The necessary planning has been done to ensure that it's ready," said Shapiro, who the radio station said had spoken on Tuesday.

Somewhat overlooked in all the hype over the explosion chamber accusations is a very important point regarding Iran's uranium enrichment work. As noted in an article by Reuters today, such work is very closely monitored by the IAEA already:

They say Iran's production of uranium refined to a fissile concentration of 20 percent, which it started two years ago, seems to have remained steady in recent months after a major escalation of the work in late 2011 and early this year.

Progress in Iran's controversial nuclear program is closely watched by the West and Israel as it could determine the time the Islamic Republic would need to build nuclear bombs, should it decide to do so.

Getting Iran to stop the higher-level enrichment is expected to be a priority for world powers when they meet with Iran in Baghdad next week in an attempt to start resolving the decade-old dispute over Tehran's atomic ambitions.

"It is still going strong. I hear it is unchanged," one diplomat accredited to the U.N. nuclear watchdog, which regularly inspects Iran's declared atomic sites, said about the country's most sensitive nuclear activity.

[Emphasis added]

What we also know from this close monitoring, as reported in the IAEA's November, 2011 report (pdf), is that all enriched uranium produced at these monitored sites is accounted for, so any presumed weapons development would have to assume an undeclared site where enrichment is being carried out:

While the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at the nuclear facilities and LOFs declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement, as Iran is not providing the necessary cooperation, including by not implementing its Additional Protocol, the Agency is unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear

material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities.

What we have now is the IAEA and Iran inching closer to inspections of the Parchin site and potentially an agreement to suspend enrichment of uranium to 20%.

Those advocating war would then attempt to accuse Iran of having cleaned the Parchin site, but as I have pointed out, this would be impossible without removing the chamber itself if neutron trigger work has been carried out there. In addition, war hawks also will have to postulate the existence of a separate, undeclared site for enrichment if they are to continue insisting that weapons development continues or has been restarted, despite the US NIE in 2007 declaring that all such work stopped in 2003.