

November IAEA Report: Centrifuge File Not Closed; Natanz Enrichment Expands

By David Albright and Jacqueline Shire

November 15, 2007

The IAEA issued today its latest report on the status of Iran's cooperation with the Agency. The report states that Iran is still not halting uranium enrichment activities, as demanded by the United Nations Security Council. It also states that Iran is revealing new information about its past gas centrifuge program, as required in the so-called Workplan, agreed between Iran and the IAEA on August 21, 2007, although the report shows the centrifuge issue is not closed. The IAEA also emphasizes that its knowledge about Iran's current nuclear program is diminishing and urges Iran to implement the Additional Protocol as soon as possible.

Status of the Workplan: The IAEA outlined its discussions with Iran on the history of its P1 and P2 centrifuge programs. The P1 centrifuge is currently installed at the Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP) at Natanz. Iran is undertaking research and development (R&D) on a variant of the P2, a faster, more advanced centrifuge, and has apparently started mechanical testing of a P2 centrifuge.

The report states in paragraph 42 that Iran "has provided sufficient access to individuals and has responded in a timely manner" to the IAEA's questions, while noting that its responses are too often reactive and not proactive. However, recent media reports state that Iran denied the IAEA's requests to interview two Iranians, and the report notes that it could not interview the past and possibly current head of the P2 centrifuge effort. This raises questions about whether Iran's cooperation is, in fact, sufficient.

Having complete answers is fundamental to any verification effort. The report in places uses ambiguous language, such as "consistent with" the IAEA's other information, or states that Iran has provided clarifications and amplifications. At the same time, it laments Iran's lack of active cooperation and full transparency.

An IAEA official stated (and the report notes) that Iran is expected to deliver additional information on the P1 and P2 centrifuge programs soon, including on the key outstanding issue of the role of the Physics Research Center (PHRC) in the gas centrifuge program. (The two individuals that the IAEA could not interview were former heads of this center.) One senior IAEA official characterized the report as showing that Iran is moving on the P1/P2 issue, but it is not opening the "doors and windows" on its past program.

Need for the Additional Protocol: A key paragraph in the report is 43, which states that Iran must establish “the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities” in Iran, as well as the exclusively peaceful nature of its declared nuclear activities. This is not possible without the Additional Protocol in place. The IAEA notes, “This is especially important in the light of Iran’s undeclared activities for almost two decades and the need to restore confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme. Therefore, the Director General again urges Iran to implement the Additional Protocol at the earliest possible date.”

Uranium enrichment continues: Iran continues to refuse Security Council demands to halt uranium enrichment at Natanz. As of November 3, 2007, the report states that Iran had completed installation of all eighteen centrifuge cascades in the FEP and begun to operate them with uranium hexafluoride. Iran’s consumption of uranium hexafluoride has increased incrementally. Between August 17 and November 3, 2007 Iran’s number of operating centrifuge cascades rose from 12 to 18. In that same period, consumption of uranium hexafluoride increased from 690 kg to 1240 kg. Iran’s consumption rates indicate that its centrifuges continue to operate well below their full potential, though are rising slightly. During the reporting period, Natanz produced on average about 22 kilograms of low enriched uranium per month.

U.S., UK and France asking more questions: The stage appears to be set for a continued tug-of-war between the IAEA and Iran, and to an even greater extent between Iran and the United States, France, Britain and Germany.

Iran now maintains that it has given the IAEA all the necessary information to remove ambiguities about its work on P-1 and P2 centrifuges and that there need be no further discussion of it.¹ Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator Saed Jalili said today “The report says clearly that most of the ambiguities have been removed.”

Not so, according to the IAEA report and the U.S., UK and France. These three countries have separately presented the IAEA with detailed sets of questions that they want Iran to answer before the issues outlined in the workplan document can be considered closed. ISIS has seen the eight page document prepared by U.S. officials, titled “Outstanding Centrifuge-related Issues/Requests as Reported by IAEA Director General ElBaradei.” It begins by asking “what is the true scope of Iran’s ongoing enrichment program” and raises eight issues, each with key questions that must be answered.

These questions reflect the large amount of work Iran may have to do to thoroughly answer existing questions about the past and current activities of its P1 and P1 centrifuge programs. They also make clear that Iran’s limited cooperation with the IAEA in answering some questions about its past activities is not sufficient to delay action at the UN Security Council on a third sanctions resolution.

¹ Fars News Agency, “IAEA Chief under U.S. Pressure to Change report on Iran,” November 15, 2007 <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8608240282>