



## IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM A CONCERN TO U.S. AND EUROPE

January 26, 2005

*European Union representatives are currently negotiating with Iran over its nuclear power program, a program the United States and other countries consider a threat that could lead to conflict if talks fail.*

Talks between representatives of the European E3 -- Britain, France and Germany -- and the Islamic Republic of Iran over that country's desire to develop enriched uranium, a material used for nuclear power and potentially nuclear weapons, have stalled.

Though Iran temporarily stopped production of its uranium program in November, at a meeting between the two groups in Geneva, Switzerland, Iran refused the European countries' request for permanent "cessation" or "dismantlement," according to the Associated Press.

"The two positions cannot coexist," said a diplomat who attended the meeting. "If the impasse cannot be resolved, then there will be no solution."

### **U.S./Iranian relations**

Highly enriched uranium is a radioactive material used to speed up the chain reaction that sets off a nuclear weapon. While many countries develop low-enriched uranium at nuclear plants to generate electricity, the highly enriched form suggests a weapon program.

Iran insists that its only objective is to generate power for electricity.

But the United States and other countries have accused Iran of developing weapons of mass destruction, despite signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970. Following President Bush's inauguration on Jan. 20, Vice President Dick Cheney said Iran topped a list of global "potential trouble spots."

### **Potential conflict with Iran**

Recently, fears have arisen that the United States could engage in a conflict with Iran similar to the war in Iraq, a war that started because the United States believed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Adding to the furor, a January article in the New Yorker magazine written by Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh suggested that the White House recently authorized U.S. special forces to conduct secret missions in Iran to scope out potential military targets.

The White House has said that Hersh's article was filled with errors and Iran has dismissed any notion of a U.S. military strike.

"We are eagerly looking for the American commandos to come to Iran since they are chicks which would rapidly be picked up by our eagles," Iran's intelligence minister said, according to a Washington Post article.

Officially, the White House has said it favors a diplomatic approach to dealing with Iran, according to British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who flew to the United States this week to discuss the Iranian threat.

Meanwhile, the defense minister of Israel, which is only 800 miles from Iran and within striking distance of a nuclear missile, has said, "under no circumstances would Israel be able to abide by nuclear weapons in Iranian possession."

Israel has confirmed that it is working on measures to undermine Iran's nuclear program, with senior leaders hinting that Israel may take preemptive action if that is deemed necessary.

### **Iran background**

Iran is the largest country in the Middle East with a population of 69 million. The country was known as Persia until 1935 and later became an Islamic republic after conservative clerics overthrew the monarchy.

In 1979 a group of Iranian students seized the American Embassy in the capital city of Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage to protest U.S. and Israeli policies. Known as the Iran hostage crisis, it wasn't until the day President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated in 1981 that the standoff ended.

The United States has designated Iran a state sponsor of terrorism and has imposed economic sanctions on the country. President Mohammad Khatami presently rules the country, although most of the power lies within the Council of Guardians, a group of religious leaders elected by members of the clerical community.

*--Compiled by Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour Extra*

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