Iran Threatens U.S. Over Nuclear Program

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VIENNA, Austria (AP) -- Iran threatened the United States with "harm and pain" Wednesday if the U.S. tries to use the U.N. Security Council -- which has the power to impose sanctions -- as a lever to punish Tehran for its suspect nuclear program.

Washington warned that Tehran has enough nuclear material for up to 10 atomic bombs.

The rhetoric reflected the intensity of the debate at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy's 35-nation board over a critical report on Iran's nuclear program. The meeting ended late Wednesday, formally opening the path to Security Council action that could range from a mild statement urging compliance to sanctions or even military measures.

The meeting also set the stage for a potential struggle between Washington, which seeks harsh measures against Tehran, and Moscow, which advocates a softer line.

But the head of the IAEA -- the U.N. nuclear watchdog -- cast Security Council involvement as a continuation of diplomacy with Iran.

Mohamed ElBaradei also suggested that Washington might need to talk to Tehran directly if negotiations reach the stage of focusing on security guarantees to Tehran in exchange for concessions on its nuclear program.

"Once we start to discuss security issues my personal view (is) that at one point the U.S. should also be engaged into a dialogue," ElBaradei told reporters.

The IAEA put the Security Council on alert over the issue last month but delayed any action to give more time for diplomacy under an agreement by the United States, Russia, China, France and Britain -- the five permanent Security Council members that wield veto power.

At U.N. headquarters in New York, the five permanent members met for the first time Wednesday to discuss a first response to the Iran nuclear crisis.

One council diplomat said after the quick consultations that Britain had proposed that ElBaradei report back in two weeks about Iran's progress toward compliance with IAEA resolutions. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity because consultations were private.

Iran claims its nuclear program is peaceful and only aimed at generating electricity, but an increasing number of countries have come to share the U.S. view that Tehran is seeking to develop atomic weapons.

Iran has been under growing international pressure over the past three years as the IAEA compiled worrying details about its nuclear activities.

But formal Security Council involvement opens a new dimension because the U.N. body could impose economic and political sanctions against Iran. Such action is unlikely because of opposition from Russia and China, which have strategic and commercial ties with Tehran.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested Wednesday that Moscow would not support sanctions and he ruled out military action.

"I don't think sanctions as a means to solve a crisis have ever achieved a goal in the recent history," Lavrov said after meeting Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the United Nations.

He added that Russia was "convinced that there is no military solution to this crisis" -- an apparent rebuttal to Vice President Dick Cheney's warning this week that Iran would face "meaningful consequences" if it does not back away from an international confrontation over its nuclear program. Cheney did not specify what the U.S. would do, but said it "is keeping all options on the table."

U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns suggested America would push for sanctions if appeals and demands failed.

"We believe that next Monday or Tuesday the United Nations Security Council will begin a very active debate about Iran's nuclear ambitions," Burns said Wednesday. "That debate will be designed to shine a very large, intensive spotlight on what we believe to be a clear Iranian (weapons) program."

Burns told the House International Relations Committee that U.S. officials expect the Security Council to consider a statement of condemnation against Iran. He said, however, that the Bush administration would like to go "beyond that to entertain the possibility of a resolution to isolate and hopefully influence (Iran's) behavior."

If Iran does not respond to words and resolutions, "then we believe that the world community should entertain the possibility of sanctions against Iran," Burns said.

ElBaradei's report accused Iran of withholding information, possessing plans linked to nuclear weapons and refusing to freeze uranium enrichment -- a possible pathway to nuclear arms.

In comments to the IAEA board meeting, Gregory Schulte, the U.S. delegate to the agency, said the 85 tons of feedstock uranium gas already produced by Iran "if enriched, could produce enough material for about 10 nuclear weapons."

Separately, France, Germany and Britain warned that what is known about Iran's enrichment program could represent "the tip of the iceberg."

Iran reacted angrily to Washington's role in the standoff over its nuclear ambitions.

"The United States has the power to cause harm and pain," Ali Asghar Soltanieh, the chief Iranian delegate to the IAEA, said, reading from a statement. "But the United States is also susceptible to harm and pain. So if that is the path that the U.S. wishes to choose, let the ball roll."

He did not elaborate, but diplomats said the comment as possibly a veiled threat to use oil as a weapon. Iran is the second-largest producer within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and has leverage with extremist groups in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East that could harm U.S. interests.

Iran's minister of petroleum, Sayed Kazem Vaziri Hamaneh, however, sought to ease concerns about Iran's oil plans, telling reporters at an OPEC meeting in Vienna: "Iran has no intention whatsoever of reducing its oil exports."

The White House dismissed Iran's threats.

"I think that provocative statements and actions only further isolate Iran from the rest of the world," White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters traveling with President Bush.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations said the comments reflected the menace posed by Iran.

"Their threats show why leaving a country like that with a nuclear weapon is so dangerous," John Bolton told The Associated Press by phone from Washington.

Associated Press reporters Palma Benczenleitner in Vienna, Pauline Jelinek in Washington and Nick Wadhams at the United Nations contributed to this report.

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