

Tehran begins test run of nuclear plant despite weapons fear

Contributed by Tony Halpin in Moscow - The Times Online
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Iran moves a step closer to joining the nuclear club today by beginning a test run of its Russian-built atomic power plant. Officials in Tehran said that the Bushehr plant would undergo operational tests during a visit by Sergei Kiriyyenko, the head of Russia's state atomic energy corporation.

Mr Kiriyyenko is travelling to Iran to discuss completion of the \$1 billion (£695 million) project, which is running almost three years behind schedule after repeated delays caused by disputes over payment. Iran's atomic energy organisation said that the power station was now expected to start work in the first half of this year. Russia said that today's test would not involve nuclear fuel.

Tehran insists that its nuclear programme is purely for civilian purposes to overcome electricity shortages in its economy. But the United States and European Union suspect that Iran is secretly building a nuclear bomb and the United Nations Security Council has imposed sanctions over the regime's refusal to suspend uranium enrichment.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will meet next week to consider the latest report by the director-general, Mohamed ElBaradei, on Iran, amid continuing concern over the Islamic republic's intentions. The IAEA reported last week that inspectors had discovered an additional 209 kilograms (461lb) of low-enriched uranium, a third more than was previously thought to be held. The find took Tehran over the threshold of the "nuclear breakout capacity" of a tonne of fissile material, the amount that is sufficient to make a bomb.

While it could take months and even years to enrich the uranium to weapons-grade material, the development has raised fears about Iranian ambitions to new heights.

Russia has refused to abandon the Bushehr project, which it started in 1998. It argues that no evidence exists of an Iranian weapons programme and that the Islamic state has the same right as other countries to develop civil nuclear energy. Iran had provided written assurances not to use uranium supplied by Russia for any purpose other than civil energy and all spent fuel would have to be returned to Russia for reprocessing. Russia delivered 82 tonnes of low-enriched uranium to Iran last year, which is under IAEA supervision.

Alexei Borodavkin, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, told the Islamic Republic News Agency this month that Moscow saw no reason to change its policy towards Iran. He insisted that Bushehr would be completed and put into operation.

Relations between Russia and Iran present a key challenge for President Obama. The United States needs Russian help in transporting essential supplies to Nato forces in Afghanistan and it can not afford to alienate Moscow as it pushes to restrain Iran's nuclear activities. However, co-operation over Iran will also be an early test of Moscow's willingness to find common ground with the US.

Fears that Russia may sell advanced anti-aircraft systems to Tehran are already causing concern in the US and Israel, which have refused to rule out a military strike on Iran's nuclear installations if diplomacy fails.

Iran's Defence Minister visited Moscow last week amid reports that Russia was ready to sell S300 air-defence systems, which have a range of 150 kilometres (95 miles) and can intercept jets at low altitudes. Moscow has already supplied 29 Tor-M1 missile-defence systems to Tehran in a 2005 deal worth \$700 million.

Russia's defence ministry denied that it had sold "offensive weapons" to Iran. Kommersant newspaper reported, however, that Moscow had already signed a contract but was holding back delivery as a response to American overtures for an improved relationship.

The new US Administration has signalled that it is willing to accommodate Russian concerns over the planned American missile-defence shield in Eastern Europe. Since the shield is principally aimed at threats from Iran, any deal would be likely to involve Russian support for efforts to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear bomb.

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