

UN nuclear chief should be sacked for failure over Iran: Israel

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Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz called Thursday for Mohamed ElBaradei to be removed as head of the UN nuclear watchdog, saying he had turned a blind eye to archfoe Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The call for ElBaradei's dismissal comes just days before the International Atomic Energy Agency is due to publish a new report on Iran's nuclear programme, to serve as a key part of further discussions at the United Nations on whether to impose a third set of sanctions on Tehran.

"The policies followed by ElBaradei endanger world peace. His irresponsible attitude of sticking his head in the sand over Iran's nuclear programme should lead to his impeachment," Mofaz told public radio from Washington.

Mofaz, who heads "the strategic dialogue" between Israel and its main ally the United States, held talks on Wednesday with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

ElBaradei raised the ire of many Israeli officials after telling France's Le Monde newspaper that Iran would need "between three and eight years" to develop a nuclear bomb and that there were was no immediate threat.

"I want to get people away from the idea that Iran represents a clear and present danger and that we're now facing the decision whether to bombard Iran or let them have the bomb. We're not in that situation at all," the Egyptian UN nuclear chief said.

Mofaz retorted that there was no excuse for such complacency in the face of intelligence estimates.

"ElBaradei says he has no proof regarding Iran's nuclear programme when he has intelligence reports gathered by several countries and he heads an organisation responsible precisely for that," he said.

Mofaz nevertheless said he believed the Jewish state's archfoe had yet to cross the point of no return in its nuclear programme.

"The development of the necessary infrastructure for enriching uranium is slower than the Iranians say it is," the former chief of staff said, a day after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad again boasted that Iran had reached a key target of 3,000 centrifuges for uranium enrichment.

Israel, which belongs to the UN nuclear watchdog but is not a signatory to its key Non-Proliferation Treaty, is widely considered to have the Middle East's sole -- if undeclared -- nuclear arsenal.

It considers Iran its chief enemy after repeated statements by Ahmadinejad that the Jewish state should be wiped off the map.

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak said on Wednesday (eds: correct) that "all options remain on the table", including military action, to prevent Iran developing an atomic bomb.

Senior Israeli army intelligence officer Yossi Beidetz told parliament's foreign affairs and defence committee that Iran could acquire the bomb within two years.

"Assuming Iran is not faced with difficulties, the most severe scenario is that Iran could have a nuclear bomb by the end of 2009," committee members quoted Beidetz as saying.

The UN Security Council has imposed two sets of sanctions against Iran over its failure to heed ultimatums to suspend

uranium enrichment, the process which makes fuel for nuclear reactors but in highly enriched form can also produce the fissile core of an atomic bomb.

Israel and the West fear that Iran's nuclear programme is cover for a drive to develop the bomb but Iran insists it is aimed solely at producing electricity for a growing population once fossil fuels run out.

In 1981, Israel bombed a French-built nuclear reactor in Iraq, which under the rule of now executed dictator Saddam Hussein was then its biggest enemy. The raid was heavily criticised by the United States and UN Security Council.

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