



Iran Using Loophole in Nuclear Agreement

Tuesday December 21, 2004 By GEORGE JAHN, Associated Press Writer

VIENNA, Austria - Iran is continuing with a key process used to enrich uranium, which can be used to make nuclear weapons, but it is not violating an agreement to stop such activities because of a loophole in the deal, diplomats said Tuesday.

The diplomats told The Associated Press that Tehran is still turning tons of raw uranium into uranium metal. The metal is a precursor of uranium hexafluoride — a substance that can then be used to produce weapons-grade uranium.

Concerns about Iran grew after revelations in mid-2002 of two secret nuclear facilities — a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy water production plant near Arak. That led to a subsequent IAEA investigation of what turned out to be nearly two decades of covert nuclear activities, including suspicious "dual use" experiments that can be linked to weapons programs.

Iran agreed last month to stop enriching uranium while it negotiates with France, Germany and Britain on the terms of a long-term deal to provide the country with technological help in creating a peaceful nuclear program and other forms of aid.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency agreed to police the agreement and has placed seals on feed points at Iran's enrichment plant at Isfahan, meant to prevent new material from being introduced into the facilities.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior diplomat familiar with Iran's nuclear dossier said those seals remained in place Tuesday, meaning Iran was only converting raw "yellowcake" uranium already in the pipeline into uranium metal.

That, he said, was allowed under the terms of the agreement reached between the Europeans and Tehran, which permits Iran to convert all of the 37 tons of yellowcake that was already being converted when the deal was struck into a "stable state."

Much of those 37 tons was in the form of a liquid, and the immediate next step would be to turn it into the more "stable state" of uranium metal, said the diplomat.

"All of it was already in the pipeline," he said.

A diplomat from the European Union, which was also party to the deal negotiated by France, Germany and Britain, said Tuesday that the Europeans were reserving judgment on Iran's move but it appeared not to be in violation of the suspension agreement.

About three tons of this amount already was fully converted in November into the end product of uranium hexafluoride — the gas that is enriched into fuel- or weapons-grade uranium. At the time, that move raised doubts about how serious Iran was about reaching a deal on suspension.

Nuclear experts say that when fully processed, the 37 tons of yellowcake can theoretically yield more than 200 pounds of weapons-grade uranium, enough to make five crude nuclear weapons.

The issue of enrichment is extremely sensitive as the international community tries to determine if Iran is using its nuclear program for peaceful purposes only, as Tehran insists, or trying to make weapons.

The United States says Iran is working to produce nuclear weapons — something Tehran denies, saying it looks to atomic power purely as an energy source.

Iran agreed to suspend its enrichment program last year, in an effort to build international trust. But that commitment eroded over the subsequent months — until the new agreement in November on suspension.