

June 10, 2004

U.N. sees signs of massive Iran nuke plans-diplomats

By Louis Charbonneau

VIENNA (Reuters) - The U.N. nuclear watchdog has found indications Iran wanted to equip thousands of uranium enrichment centrifuges, enough to produce bomb-grade material for several warheads per year, diplomats say.

The United States is certain to treat this revelation as further proof that Iran's nuclear programme is a front for developing an atom bomb. Iran insists its programme is aimed solely at the peaceful generation of electricity.

At a closed-door meeting on Iran, a senior inspector from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) told the agency's governing board a private Iranian company had expressed interest in "tens of thousands" of magnets for advanced P-2 centrifuges from a European intermediary, said a diplomat who attended.

The IAEA said last week in its latest report on Iran that the company had expressed interest in 4,000 magnets from a European intermediary -- enough for 2,000 centrifuges -- and had added it might buy in "higher numbers" to get a lower price.

Iran said it only bought 150 sample magnets from an Asian firm. But one diplomat told Reuters "tens of thousands" meant the Iranian firm was considering buying at least 20,000 more.

Since two magnets are required for a single centrifuge, which purifies uranium for use as fuel for power plants or weapons by spinning at supersonic speeds, this would have been enough for at least 10,000 P-2 centrifuges, diplomats said on Thursday.

"This could produce a significant amount of weapons grade uranium," said one diplomat, adding that it would be enough for at least several nuclear warheads a year.

Another diplomat said the problem with the Iranian story on the P-2 centrifuges -- which is one of the IAEA's most urgent unanswered questions about Iran's nuclear programme -- was that there are signs the P-2 programme was massive and not a tiny "research and development" project as Tehran insists.

"If it was a small scale research programme, why were they interested in thousands of centrifuges?" the diplomat said.

IRAN DISMISSES U.S. "MISUNDERSTANDINGS"

The IAEA's other major unanswered question concerns traces of enriched uranium found on domestic and imported centrifuge parts. The Iranians have said the traces

were all due to contaminated centrifuge parts purchased from Pakistan, though the IAEA no longer finds this explanation plausible.

Diplomats who attended Thursday's meeting said the IAEA has found multiple levels of enriched uranium on centrifuges, which could indicate that Iran has been enriching uranium itself to levels close to what is useable in an atomic bomb.

One diplomat said the Iranian delegation had also told the IAEA board that Tehran was cooperating fully with the agency.

But Pierre Goldschmidt, IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei's deputy and head of the inspection programme, "corrected the Iranians for the record... He said cooperation had not been 100 percent", the diplomat said.

After the meeting, Iran's top delegate played down U.S. concerns about Iran's programme.

"The U.S. has some misunderstandings about our nuclear programme which we corrected," senior Iranian Foreign Ministry official Amir Zamaninia told reporters after the meeting.

Zamaninia said the United States' misunderstandings were about the P-2 centrifuges and the uranium traces. Washington says Iran's failure to cooperate with the IAEA's attempt to resolve these two issues is proof it is hiding a bomb programme.

U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in Vienna, Kenneth Brill, said it was no misunderstanding and the new IAEA report showed Iran had misinformed the U.N. about its P-2 programme.

"I did not hear anything that corrected (what the IAEA wrote in its report)...although I did hear an effort to try to explain it away," said Brill. "Many states, including the United States, believe that Iran is trying to hide a programme they don't want brought to light".