

U.S.: Iran May Be Running Nuke Programs

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By *GEORGE JAHN, Associated Press Writer*

VIENNA, Austria - Iran may be running a covert military nuclear program parallel to the peaceful one it has opened to international scrutiny in efforts to dispel suspicions it has weapons ambitions, U.S. officials said Tuesday.



Reuters

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said new intelligence on Iran's nuclear activities was strengthening suspicions of two programs — one that inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency have access to and another, run by the military and geared toward making nuclear weapons.

"We are beginning to see indications that there is a parallel military program," one of the officials told The Associated Press. The source cautioned that the "limited evidence" was not enough to draw firm conclusions.

Alireza Jafarzadeh, a former spokesman for Iran's exiled opposition National Council of Resistance, said "between 350 and 400 nuclear physicists" are involved in the weapons program.

Another official spoke of "explicit concerns" of that the military is controlling nuclear programs aimed at making weapons.

The United States has long maintained that Iran is not telling the truth when it says its nuclear programs are geared only toward generating energy, insisting that Iran's real goal is to make arms.

Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton has repeatedly said that Iran is actively violating its treaty obligations.

But the comments Tuesday by the U.S. sources appeared to be the first suggesting that Tehran was running two programs — one for public show and the other to make weapons.

Pirooz Hosseini, Iran's chief delegate to the Vienna-based IAEA, dismissed the comments as "baseless allegations."

Any valid information on Iran's nuclear intentions "will come from the IAEA and not from these kinds of people," Hosseini told the AP.

The IAEA declined comment.

But Jafarzadeh said sources "with access to the Iranian regime's nuclear program" told him that hard-liners answering directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had recently formed a "new military special unit to take over the (military) nuclear program."

Jafarzadeh said the unit controlled a program separate from that under the responsibility of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran now being probed by IAEA inspectors.

That program runs facilities scattered over the country, including secret sites used for enriching uranium with the objective "of making (nuclear) weapons, he said from Washington.

Jafarzadeh said "between 350 and 400 nuclear physicists, experts and researchers are under the control of the military special unit."

He spoke as a senior U.S. State Department official accused Iran of using the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty — the cornerstone of international efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons — "as cover for the development of nuclear weapons."

"States like Iran are actively violating their treaty obligations, and have gained access to technologies and materials for their nuclear weapons programs," Bolton said, speaking at U.N. headquarters in New York.

The best thing Iran can do now is "come clean," answer all outstanding questions, and open its nuclear program "to transparent inspections," said Bolton.

Iran said it suspended uranium enrichment last year under international pressure but continued manufacture of uranium-enriching centrifuge components. This month it said it had also stopped building centrifuges.

Iran's nuclear aims first came under international scrutiny after the IAEA discovered a covert centrifuge facility at Natanz. First word of the existence of the centrifuges came nearly two years ago from Jafarzadeh. He now runs the Strategic Policy Consulting think tank after his exile organization was closed down in the United States, which lists it as a terrorist group.

Since the initial discovery of the centrifuges, traces of weapons grade, highly enriched uranium, new, more advanced centrifuge prototypes and suspicious covert experiments that can also have military applications have increased suspicions, even though Tehran says it was interested only in low-enriched uranium for power generation.

Tehran last month acknowledged for the first time that its military was involved in the country's nuclear program but insisted that its participation — building centrifuges — had been for the civilian sector.

After several inconclusive board meetings of the IAEA on Iran's agenda, agency chief Mohammed ElBaradei hopes to present a fuller assessment of Iran's nuclear activities to the next board of governors gathering in June.

Iran said Saturday it has offered the "complete story" to the U.N. nuclear watchdog both about the traces of weapons-grade uranium and documents pertaining to advanced centrifuges that could be used to produce atomic bombs.