

Sources: Iran Military Supervising Atomic Experts

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By Louis Charbonneau

VIENNA (Reuters) - Iran's Revolutionary Guards are overseeing some 400 nuclear experts in order to prevent further leaks of sensitive information about Tehran's atomic facilities, an Iranian exile and informed diplomats said.

Alireza Jafarzadeh, who disclosed in August 2002 that Iran had a hidden uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water plant at Arak, told Reuters his new information came from the same sources who told him about Natanz and Arak.

"According to the latest information I have from well-placed sources inside Iran, some 400 nuclear experts are now under the control and supervision of the Revolutionary Guards," he said.

The Revolutionary Guards were set up after the 1979 Islamic Revolution as a force dedicated to protecting the revolution. It works in parallel with the regular army and its head is appointed directly by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Jafarzadeh was a spokesman for the exiled opposition group National Council of Resistance of Iran before the United States, which lists it as a terrorist organization, closed the NCRI's Washington office last year. He is now president of the Washington-based Strategic Policy Consulting Inc.

The United States accuses Iran of using its atomic energy program as a front to build the bomb, and insists the Iranian military is intimately involved in Tehran's nuclear activities. Tehran denies this, saying it is a civilian program dedicated to the peaceful generation of electricity.

Since August 2002, the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been attempting to verify Tehran's statements that its nuclear program is

entirely peaceful. However, Tehran has in the past withheld information from the IAEA about potentially weapons-related technology.

PARALLEL NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Jafarzadeh said that Iran's nuclear program had been split into two parallel operations -- a secret one run by a "special unit" of the Revolutionary Guards and other military institutions and headed by Khamene, and a publicly declared one run by Iran's Atomic Energy Organization.

"The military special unit has its own advanced labs and facilities, which operates away from the IAEA inspections, and are kept totally secret," he said. "Many of the experts operate under the pretext of (being) an ordinary university professor."

He said the secret program was focused on building a bomb. Despite being secret, this parallel program draws on resources of the public one declared to the IAEA when necessary.

A diplomat who follows Iran's nuclear program told Reuters the guards' supervision of the nuclear program was not new.

"Since a long time ago, the Revolutionary Guards have taken over supervision of all the nuclear activities and have trained some of their people to work there," the diplomat said.

"There are hundreds of them" now working at nuclear sites up and down the country, the diplomat said. He said they had placed some sites "off limits" to personnel they do not trust.

Iran's ambassador to the United Nations in Vienna, Pirooz Hosseini, told Reuters: "I have not heard such information. I don't think we should put too much emphasis on such news."

Other diplomats told Reuters it was no secret that the Revolutionary Guards were one of the most powerful hard-line elements inside Iran. Unlike many of the reformists who oppose building an atom bomb, the diplomats said the Revolutionary Guards want Tehran to build a bomb as soon as possible.

The guards have even forced some personnel changes inside the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization, the diplomats said.