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Iran's nuclear programme

Accusing Iran

Sep 25th 2009

World leaders say that Iran has built a second, and secret, nuclear-enrichment plant

EVER since Iran's nuclear-enrichment plant at Natanz was publicly revealed by an Iranian dissident group in 2002, experts have wondered whether the clerical regime had other facilities operating secretly, away from the prying eyes of international inspectors.

On Friday September 25th, it seems, Iran was caught out: America, France and Britain **said they had evidence** that Iran had been building a secret enrichment site for years in a mountain near to the holy city of Qom. "The size and configuration of this facility is inconsistent with a peaceful [nuclear] programme," said President Barack Obama at a G20 summit in Pittsburgh. He added that America was still ready for dialogue, and that Iran had the right to nuclear energy for civilian use, but that Iran had to come clean immediately about its suspected nuclear-weapons programme.

Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, said that if Iran did not halt enrichment by December further sanctions should be imposed. "We cannot let the Iranian leaders gain time while the motors [centrifuges] are running," he declared. Gordon Brown, the British prime minister, accused Iran of "serial deception over many years" and concluded that outsiders have "no choice today but to draw a line in the sand." Russia called for an immediate investigation by the **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)**.

Iran had tried to soften the blow of these accusations by pre-empting the announcement with a letter to the IAEA admitting to the existence of the plant. An IAEA spokesman said it had been told by Iran that "no nuclear material has been introduced into the facility". But Iran has undoubtedly been placed on the defensive ahead of its meeting in Geneva on October 1st with the "P5+1" countries—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus

Germany. Iran says it has no intention of discussing its nuclear programme; the latest revelations ensure it will have no choice but to do so.



American officials say that Mr Obama shared intelligence about the plant with Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev at a meeting this week on the margins of the UN General Assembly. This may help to explain Mr Medvedev's greater willingness to consider sanctions. "Russia's position is simple," he said on September 24th, "Sanctions are seldom productive but they are sometimes inevitable."

Western diplomats hope that if Russia agrees to more punitive measures, China would not oppose them alone. But for the moment Beijing is wary. China imports much of its crude oil from Iran and recently signed a deal to sell back refined fuel. Its foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, said the issue of Iran's nuclear programme should be resolved through "peaceful negotiations".

Iran's hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, under pressure at home over allegations that his re-election in June was rigged, has championed the nuclear programme as evidence that the Islamic republic had joined the ranks of the world's most scientifically advanced nations.

He says Iran has no intention of acquiring an atomic bomb; it is only making low-enriched uranium to fuel nuclear-power stations. But the fear is that the same centrifuges could be reconfigured to make high-enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. A series of discoveries by inspectors suggests that Iran has, at the least, been experimenting with components for nuclear warheads. A secret annex to an IAEA report last month said Iran had, for instance, developed a warhead with a chamber that seemed designed to carry a nuclear bomb.

The underground plant at Natanz, filled mostly with early models of IR-1 centrifuges and monitored by the IAEA, has already produced enough low-enriched uranium which, if diverted, could make several nuclear bombs. The plant in Qom, only modest in size, may have two possible functions. It could be an alternative plant to be used in case Natanz were destroyed by America or Israel. Or it could be used secretly with more sophisticated machines quickly to turn Iran's legal stockpile of low-enriched uranium into high-enriched uranium for weapons, for example if Iran were to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Either way, the Iranian regime has a lot of explaining to do.