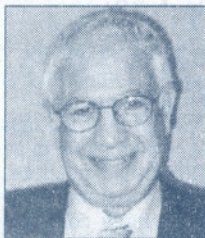


Breaking the Irania

Iran,



By Amir Taheri

Iran does not have any nuclear power plant and is unlikely to have one working for another year or so. In such a situation, there seems little point in picking a quarrel with the United Nations over uranium enrichment

COULD Russian incompetence provide an unexpected way out of the impasse over Iran's nuclear programme?

The question is seriously raised in both Tehran and the major western capitals as both sides seek a way to prevent the total collapse of the negotiating process. The man who brought up the question is none other than Assistant to the President and Director of the Islamic Republic's Nuclear Programme Ghulam-Reza Aqazadeh. He was in Moscow last week, trying to get "some clear answers" about the fate of Iran's first and so far only nuclear power plant at Bushehr.

The plant was initially due for completion in March 2004. That was later postponed to March 2005, a date chosen to allow the then

President Muhammad Khatami to leave office with a bang. When that did not happen, the newly elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad set a new inauguration date: Feb 11, 2006, which marked the 27th anniversary of the revolution.

Last month, however, Aqazadeh informed Ahmadinejad that the new inauguration deadline could not be met. A team of scientists sent by Aqazadeh to inspect the plant discovered "hundreds of problems" and came up with questions that "need to be addressed before we accept delivery."

When it came to revealing what he really felt about the Russian contractors, Aqazadeh minced no words.

Here is what he said in Moscow last Monday: "The Russians had no experience building nuclear plants outside their own country, especially in difficult terrain such as the one in Bushehr. The Russian Atom Stroy Export Company suffered from many weaknesses, in scientific, technological, financial and managerial fields. Had I been present when the decision was made, I would certainly not have signed the contract with them."

Aqazadeh revealed a number of interesting facts for the first time. First, he said it had taken the Russians more than five years to understand the initial design of the power plant as made by the German company Siemens in the 1970s. But even then, the Russian company did not have the scientific and technological capabilities needed to complete the plant according to German design.

As a result, they opted for a Russian design that had been used to build the ill-fated one at Chernobyl. When Iranian scientists protested, they were silenced by the then President Hashemi Rafsanjani who had wanted to speed up the nuclear programme before he left office in 1997. The completion of the Bushehr had already cost Iran "more than building a new nuclear power plant."

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According to Aqazadeh, the owners of the Russian company tried a scam that was routine in post-Communist Russia: Signing huge contracts and then declaring bankruptcy. When the Russian contractors informed Tehran that they were bankrupt, and could not borrow any more from the banks, the Iranians took the matter up with Russian President Vladimir Putin who stepped in to save the situation by nationalising the company.

Iran nuclear impasse

Aqazadeh also criticised Russian workmanship as "substandard", and served notice that the plant may face numerous problems before it can be cleared for inauguration. One important area of concern is the fact that the plant is located on one of the most active earthquake zones on earth. While the Russians say the plant will resist tremors of up to 7 on the Richter scale, many Iranian

Without saying so directly, Aqazadeh criticised former President Rafsanjani for his haste in pushing the project through, regardless of the many scientific and environmental problems involved. The only conclusion that one can draw is that Rafsanjani was not interested in electricity; all he wanted was an excuse for uranium enrichment.

Aqazadeh ruled out a new inauguration date but expressed the hope that the plant would be completed in "another six to seven months." This means that the Feb 11, 2007 date is also out of the question as is the March 21, 2007 that coincides with Now-Ruz, the Iranian New Year. The soonest that the Russians can complete the plant is next summer after which Iran would demand a series of safety tests that could take many months to complete. The plant would also need a safety certificate from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), not to mention Iran's own Environment Protection Organisation (Sazman Mohit Zist).

So, if Iran does not have any nuclear power plant and is unlikely to have one working for another year or so, what is the point of picking a quarrel with the United Nations over uranium enrichment?

The Islamic republic could easily suspend uranium procession and enrichment pending the completion of its first nuclear power plant. The picture portrayed by Aqazadeh of Russian incompetence lends credence to Ahmadinejad's assertion that the Islamic republic cannot depend on the Russian promise of providing uranium fuel for the Bushehr plant for the first

10 years of its existence. Nevertheless, it is clear that Iran does not need any uranium fuel for at least another year.

It is, therefore, possible for Tehran to announce a voluntary decision to suspend uranium enrichment for at least six months in order to allow talks to begin with the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany. If the talks go well, Iran could always buy uranium fuel from the 5+1 group or seek their technological support in developing Iran's domestic processing and enrichment programme. And if the projected talks develop in a way that Tehran does not like, it could always walk out and resume uranium enrichment.

The core of the current crisis consists of the suspicion that the Islamic republic is not really interested in nuclear energy and is engaged in a clandestine operation to build atomic weapons. Tehran's behaviour, insisting to go to the edge of war in order to enrich uranium for a nuclear power plant that does not exist, is bound to encourage such suspicion. Aqazadeh has shown a degree of courage rare in despotic regimes. He has exposed a project that has been mismanaged from the start and caused huge political problems without any providing any significant advantages in scientific or commercial terms. His subtext is simple: It is folly to push the nation towards war in the name of what is, after all, a piece of technological junk. He says he would not have signed the contract for what many in Iran already labelled as Chernobyl on the Gulf. COURTESY ARAB NEWS

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scientists fear that this may not be the case. Iranian scientists are also concerned about inadequate provisions for recycling the plant's spent fuel, and pouring its used water into the Gulf.

Aqazadeh made an important revelation: The Bushehr plant, which had been designed by Siemens to produce 1,100 megawatts of electricity, has been scaled down by the Russians to a capacity of 440 megawatts.