

Heavy Metal

By Joseph Cirincione , Jill Marie Parillo , Caterina Dutto

If you do not know the difference between uranium metal and uranium oxide, you never heard of “Green Salt” until today, and you have been more interested in Pittsburgh vs. Seattle than Tehran vs. Vienna, here’s your chance to catch up on the latest developments in the Iranian nuclear showdown.

We provide answers below (with extensive quotes from the confidential IAEA report) to three key questions: What did the IAEA report say that was new, what does reporting to the Security Council mean, and what happens next?

1. What new evidence was in the January 31 IAEA confidential report on Iran?

Iran has taken some measures to attempt to assure the IAEA that it is in compliance with its safeguards agreement. Yet key issues remain unresolved, including explanation of particles of enriched uranium found on centrifuges, IAEA access to critical sites and scientists, and the interesting document detailing how to turn uranium into a metal. This later procedure has no role in fuel production; uranium in metal form is only used in nuclear weapons

The updated brief by the Deputy Director General for Safeguards says:

“Iran has shown the Agency more than 60 documents said to have been drawings, specifications and supporting documentation handed over by the intermediaries, many of which are dated from the early- to mid-1980’s. Among these was a 15-page document describing the procedures for the reduction of UF₆ to metal in small quantities, and the casting of enriched and depleted uranium metal into hemispheres, related to the fabrication of nuclear weapon components. It did not, however, include dimensions or other specifications for machined pieces for such components. According to Iran, this document had been provided on the initiative of the network, and not at the request of the AEOI. Iran has declined the Agency’s request to provide the Agency with a copy of the document, but did permit the Agency during its visit in January 2006 to examine the document again and to place it under Agency seal.”

Much of this language was reported in the **November 2005 IAEA Report** on outstanding questions on the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear activities. New to the latest report is a direct reference to a 15-page document and the critical phrase, “... related to the fabrication of nuclear weapon components.”

In addition, the IAEA report expressed the Agency’s frustration that Iran still denied inspectors access to critical scientists, particularly a professor related to the “Green Salt Project” (related to the conversion of uranium dioxide into UF₄). The Agency was also following up on information provided by the United States related to missile tests that may have been part of an effort to develop a re-entry vehicle suitable for a nuclear warhead.

2. What does reporting to the Security Council mean?

Article 12 of The IAEA statute says, “The Board shall report the non-compliance to all members and to the Security Council and General Assembly of the United Nations.” The resolution does not formally cede control of the Iranian case to the Security Council, but U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “I want there to be no confusion here that a report is a formal step to the Security Council...This is the referral we have been seeking.”

The five permanent members of the Security Council (United States, France, Britain, Russia, and China) and Germany have agreed that no Security Council action will be taken until the next IAEA Board meeting on March 6. The Director General will then present his latest report on the Iranian case. During this time the countries will try to resolve the Iranian impasse diplomatically.

This is still a diplomatic, not a military crisis. There is no imminent threat of an Iranian bomb. US intelligence agencies and most experts agree that Iran is five to ten years away from the ability to enrich uranium for either fuel or weapons.

3. What happens next?

Russia says it will continue to negotiate its proposed compromise: construction of Iranian nuclear reactors would proceed, but Iran would ship its uranium to Russia for enrichment and fabrication into fuel rods for the Iranian reactors. The IAEA will press for answers to the outstanding questions.

On March 6 the IAEA Board of Governors will meet again. IAEA Director ElBaradei will issue a comprehensive report on Iranian compliance that could be quite hard-hitting. ElBaradei told **reporters**, “if I say that I am not able to confirm the peaceful nature of that program after three years of intensive work, well, that’s a conclusion that’s going to reverberate ... around the world.” (Reuters, Jan. 15).

If Iran has not agreed to a compromise by that time, the issue will formally move to the Security Council. Security Council action is likely to proceed in stages, beginning with a general resolution urging Iran to suspend its enrichment activities. If

Iran ignores the resolution, a second resolution could require Iran to suspend its enrichment activities and increase the authority of IAEA inspectors in any case where a country is found to have violated its safeguards obligations. If Iran continues to ignore the resolutions, then targeted sanctions directed against the Iranian leadership become a real possibility.

Russia and China still hope that negotiations can solve the matter short of sanctions. Russia does not want a nuclear-armed Iran, but nor does it want the situation dictated by the United States. Both nations are unconvinced that sanctions could work (a view shared by other nations and experts) and do not want their countries to bear the brunt of the sanctions burden. But Iranian action and speeches have surprised and alienated many Russian and Chinese officials. They are willing to bring the issue to the United Nations in the hope that the diplomatic pressure will force a change in Iranian behavior and prevent the disagreement from escalating into a military confrontation.

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