

U.N. Arms Embargo on Iran Hits Roadblock
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UNITED NATIONS, Mar 8 (IPS) - When the U.N. Security Council decides to punish a member state -- be it Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia or Iraq -- one of its cherished prerogatives is the power to impose mandatory military sanctions crippling a country's armed services.

But a primarily Western-sponsored Security Council resolution currently under negotiation, and aimed at punishing Iran for its nuclear enrichment programme, is unlikely to include an arms embargo because of opposition from Russia, and to a lesser extent from China.

The reason: the Russian Federation, which shares veto powers with the United States, France, Britain and China, is one of the primary arms suppliers to Iran and accounts for billions of dollars worth of military exports.

"An arms embargo is very unlikely," says an Arab diplomat, who is also quick to point out that "just as much as Washington is protective of its political and military relationship with Israel, the Russians are equally protective of their economic and military relationship with Iran."

"If you try to impose military sanctions on Israel, the United States will exercise its veto, and if you try to do the same to Iran, the Russians will veto it."

The economic stakes on the proposed resolution are high. Nicholas Burns, a senior U.S. State Department official and one of the lead negotiators of the proposed draft resolution, was quoted as saying there would be no sanctions on the oil and gas trade either.

According to the Washington-based Congressional Research Service (CRS), Russia's arms transfer agreements with Iran totaled over two billion dollars during 2002-2005.

The last known major deal, confirmed in December 2005, has a potential worth of one billion to 1.5 billion dollars, says Tom Baranauskas, a senior Middle East analyst at the U.S.-based Forecast International, a leading provider of defence market intelligence services in the United States.

The deal includes upgrades to Iranian MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter planes, warships, fast patrol boats, TOR-M1 air defense missile systems, and upgrades to T-72 battle tanks.

"It is the transfer of the TOR-M1s in particular that aroused opposition from the United States and Israel, basically because these are mostly destined to protect the Iranian nuclear reactor facilities in Bushehr," Baranauskas told IPS.

When the first Security Council resolution against Iran was adopted late last year, the United States was forced to drop its plans to impose sanctions against Iran's nuclear plant

in Bushehr because of strong reservations expressed by Russia. The Russians are helping Iran to build that facility.

If Washington had insisted on sanctioning the nuclear plant, the Russians would have vetoed that resolution. But it passed muster after the proposed sanctions against the nuclear plant were removed.

Asked if Russia and China would go along with an arms embargo against Iran, British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry ducked the question: "I don't want at this stage to go into any discussion of what anybody accepts or doesn't. But these are some of the issues we are talking about."

He also told reporters Tuesday that the new resolution will reflect an "incremental ratcheting up" of existing sanctions.

Ambassador Alexandro Wolff, the acting U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, told reporters Iran's arms import-export trade was one of the issues under discussion.

"I don't want to go into any more details," he said, when pressed for specifics. "Our view is that there should be an expansion beyond what we have been doing before."

The resolution adopted in December imposed restrictions on the export of nuclear materiel and technology to Iran, and the freezing of financial assets of officials involved in the nuclear programme.

The proposed new resolution is expected to expand some of these restrictions -- besides a travel ban on Iranian officials linked to the nuclear programme, and restrictions on export guarantees and credits.

Jones Parry said the Security Council was making "steady progress" on the text, but wouldn't confirm whether there could be an agreement by next week.

The discussions on new sanctions have involved the five permanent members (P-5) of the Security Council -- the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia -- plus Germany.

The fact that the discussions had been confined to the P-5 has triggered complaints from some of the remaining 10 elected members of the Security Council: Belgium, Republic of Congo, Ghana, Indonesia, Italy, Panama, Peru, Qatar, Slovakia and South Africa.

Ambassador Dumisani Kumalo of South Africa, current president of the Security Council, told reporters last week that "it had been felt that the P-5 had held on to the process much longer than they should have and the 10 elected members had complained bitterly about that."

In light of that, he said, they were trying to do it differently.

"The P-5 had volunteered to change the way they handled it," he said.

Russia, and to a lesser extent China, is taking a strong stand on military sanctions because of the prolific arms trade with Iran.

Baranauskas said the only other known recent Russian arms delivery to Iran was the six Su-39 attack jets (also known as the Su-25T) around mid-2006. The contract also included spares and upgrade kits for seven ex-Iraqi Air Force Su-25Ks flown to Iran during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and which the Iranians took over.

In the unlikely event that the Security Council eventually opts for military sanctions, Iran's military forces are buttressed by a vibrant domestic arms industry.

"Yes, Iran does have a rather wide-ranging arms industry," Baranauskas told IPS. However, it is not necessarily as sophisticated and deep as the size would indicate.

There are certain areas of strength, such as missiles, but even these have been developed largely with foreign assistance, including China and North Korea, he added.

He pointed out that Iran usually makes a big deal out of constant announcements of "new" weapons, but many of these appear to be just warmed-over redesigns of older Russian and U.S. equipment, or attempts at reverse-engineering them.

"Still, the Iranian defence industry is big enough that it has become a significant exporter," Baranauskas said.

In September 2006, Iran said it was now exporting military equipment to 57 countries, with a 17 percent increase in defence sales in the year that began in March 2006, which followed a 15 percent increase in such sales in the previous year.

Asked about China's military relations, Baranauskas said "the Chinese connection is much more murky and may actually hold more potential for troublesome developments."

Although actual arms sales are still rather low (CRS shows arms transfer agreements totaling 300 million dollars, and arms deliveries totaling 200 million dollars in recent years), the Chinese are apparently willing to supply weapons that the Russians are reluctant to (such as C701 anti-ship missiles).

Furthermore, the Chinese appear to be doing quite a bit of weapons technology transfers. Also a consideration for Chinese arms sales to Iran is the fact that China has made it a priority in recent years to ensure that its energy needs are met with sufficient resources to allow development to continue.

"As a major energy supplier, Iran thus is probably regarded as a key Chinese ally," he added.

In the case of Israel, which is protected against Security Council sanctions by Washington, the United States has been the major arms supplier.

According to CRS, there was a total of 8.4 billion dollars of arms deliveries to Israel in the 1997-2004 period, with fully 7.1 billion dollars or 84.5 percent coming from a single source: the United States.

A major factor in this trend was the rise in U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) -- outright U.S. grants to Israel -- which now totals about 2.3 billion dollars a year paid for by U.S. taxpayers.

By U.S. law, Baranauskas said, 74 percent of FMF assistance to Israel must be spent on U.S. military products plowing back the grants into the U.S. defence industry.
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