

Iran Faces Politically Diluted Sanctions on Nukes

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UNITED NATIONS, Mar 23 (IPS) - When the 15-member U.N. Security Council decides to penalise Iran for its nuclear enrichment programme sometime next week, it is expected to adopt a draft resolution that has been politically diluted to meet the demands of two veto-wielding permanent members -- Russia and China -- and protect their strong economic and military interests.

"The current resolution stands out, not for the punishment it imposes on Iran," says one Asian diplomat, "but for the punishment it does not."

There are no sanctions on Iran's oil exports, which account for over 60 to 70 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings. And there are no calls for a travel ban on Iranian officials -- both of which the Western powers were keen on imposing, but which were blocked by Russia and China.

Perhaps equally important, there are no cut-offs in export credit guarantees, given mostly by European nations to companies trading with Iran.

Just as the Russians and the Chinese are protecting their arms sales and military technology transfers to Iran, the Europeans have successfully sought protection for their firms trading with Tehran.

And as expected, the resolution does not impose a mandatory arms embargo on Iran -- as it did against Iraq after its military invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

The resolution tamely calls on the 192 U.N. member states to "exercise vigilance and restraint" in the sale of weapons, including fighter aircraft, helicopters, warships, missiles and battle tanks.

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

Not surprisingly, Russia's Permanent Representative to the U.N., Vitaly Churkin, was candid enough to admit that the resolution would have no impact on his country's economic -- or military -- interests.

"The new sanctions do not affect our interests," he says. "The proposed restrictions do not relate to the previously signed contracts (with Iran) and do not limit their funding, even if carried out through companies on the sanctions list."

Russia was apparently set to exercise its veto on any resolution imposing a mandatory arms embargo on Iran. And in order to avoid the Russian veto, the four Western powers dropped their demand for military sanctions.

The resolution calls upon all member states and international financial institutions not to enter into new commitments for grants, financial assistance and concessional loans, except for humanitarian and developmental purposes.

Additionally, it imposes a ban on all Iranian arms exports and freezes the financial assets of 28 officials and institutions, including high ranking officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

South Africa, which is a non-permanent member of the Security Council and has no veto powers, called for a 90-day "time-out" and also proposed several amendments arguing that punitive measures should be directed only towards Iran's nuclear programme.

"Sanctions should never be adopted in haste when other tracks for the peaceful resolution of a situation should be addressed," it warned.

As a result of the proposed amendments -- including one for a nuclear-free Middle East sponsored by Indonesia and Qatar -- the vote on the resolution was delayed.

Although the amendments have been virtually rejected by the five big powers, South Africa's intervention has threatened to break up the consensus in the Security Council.

Asked if his country was trying to dilute the resolution further, South African Ambassador Dumisani Kumalo told reporters: "We are improving the resolution, not gutting it."

He said South Africa has always been consistent in calling on Iran to abide by decisions taken by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to end its nuclear enrichment programme.

Asked if the U.S. was resorting to the tactic of putting pressure on the government in Pretoria, Kumalo told reporters Wednesday: "If you put pressure on us, it won't work."

Dr. Natalie J. Goldring, a senior fellow with the Centre for Peace and Security Studies in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, says Iran is not a major weapons exporter, though it is a significant arms importer.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Iran was the world's 10th largest arms importer during 2001-2005, but was ranked only 62nd among arms exporters.

As a result, the proposed ban on exports of Iranian-made weapons will have little or no impact on the country.

"Dollar value alone," Goldring told IPS, "is not an effective measurement of small arms exports. Restricting Iranian arms imports and exports is another way to isolate the regime."

China, however, has been a very significant supplier of military technology to the Iranian domestic arms industry -- specifically missiles.

The new Iranian maritime cruise missile called Raad is based on the Chinese HY-2 missile, used mostly for coastal defence, according to a report on Iran by Forecast International, a leading provider of defence market intelligence services in the United States.

"While Iran readily acknowledges that its equipment is not as sophisticated as that sold by Western countries, it feels that the equipment can be as effective and much cheaper to boot," the report added.

Iran has been manufacturing several local versions of Chinese and Russian jet fighters, helicopters and warships, including mini-submarines (with North Korean or Chinese technical assistance).

Goldring says that some of the significant nuclear non-proliferation success stories are generally the product of diplomacy, economic pressure, perseverance, and luck.

"Although it's not an exact analogy, the work to halt the Libyan nuclear programme may be the best parallel for the Iranian case," she pointed out.

Both Republican and Democratic administrations in the United States alike pursued a strategy of isolating the Libyan regime politically and economically, Goldring said.

"They sustained this approach for years, until Libyan leader (Muammar el-) Qaddafi decided to make a deal to dismantle his country's nuclear programme.

"No single approach seems to have been effective. In the Libyan case, the result was a product of diplomatic, economic, and political measures. It's reasonable to assume that a similar constellation of policy approaches will be necessary in the Iranian case," she added.

"With some countries (e.g. Brazil, Argentina), we helped stall them until they chose governments that were willing to negotiate away their nuclear weapons programmes," Goldring said.

With others, such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, "We told them that we would protect them with our nuclear forces so that they would not need to develop their own."

In the Iranian case, of course, the first option is markedly more likely than the second.
(END/2007)