

By DAVID E. SANGER and WILLIAM J. BROAD of the New York Times

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WASHINGTON — The United Nations' nuclear inspectors declared for the first time on Thursday that they had extensive evidence of "past or current undisclosed activities" by Iran's military to develop a nuclear warhead, an unusually strongly worded conclusion that seems certain to accelerate Iran's confrontation with the United States and other Western countries.

Yukiya Amano, the new head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, is being watched to see how he deals with Iran.

The report confirms that Iran has enriched small quantities of uranium to 20 percent, but makes no assessment of how close it might be to producing a nuclear weapon, which Tehran denies it is seeking to do.

At a briefing at the White House shortly after the agency's report was released, senior administration officials said they saw continuing evidence that Iran had to struggle just to keep its uranium-enrichment equipment running. Thousands of centrifuges that it installed at Natanz, its main site for enrichment, are not spinning.

The Obama administration said that Iran was producing only 100 grams a day of enriched uranium, and that even if it could quadruple its capacity it would still need several years to make enough for a weapon.

Still, the report cited new evidence, much of it collected in recent weeks, that appeared to paint a picture of a concerted drive in Iran toward a weapons capability. Echoing the Obama administration, the agency described an escalating series of steps by Iran: the enrichment to 20 percent, its acknowledgment of a secret enrichment plant in Qum, its efforts to metalize uranium and its rejection of a deal to enrich its uranium outside the country.

The report also reiterated evidence that Iran appeared to have tested ways of detonating weapons and to have worked extensively to design warheads small enough to fit atop a missile.

One senior administration official, told of the report's main conclusions, said that he thought the actions described in the document "almost suggest the Iranian military is inviting a confrontation." In fact, some in the Obama administration suspect that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps or its leading religious leaders are betting that an escalation of the nuclear confrontation might distract attention from the protests that have rocked the government, while unifying the country against outsiders supposedly trying to suppress Iran's rise as a significant power.

The report buttressed that view by indicating that Iran had moved most of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium into an above-ground storage plant at Natanz, where it is vulnerable to military attack.

"It's odd, and there is no technical explanation for it," the senior administration official said at a briefing. "There must be some other explanation." He and other Obama administration officials declined to speculate why the Iranians would deliberately place their stockpile in a place where, with relatively little effort, Israel or another country could strike it.

The report also indicated that for the first time Iran told inspectors it was preparing to make its uranium into a metallic form — a step that can be explained by some civilian applications, but is widely viewed as necessary for making the core of an atom bomb. The report does not say what explanation the Iranians offered, if any, for the activity, other than general research and development.

Mr. Amano's attitude toward Iran is being closely watched; some officials were concerned that he would be unwilling to confront the Iranians directly in his first months in office. But as one American official said Thursday, "It's been clear to us that he recognizes the severity of what's going on."

In fact, the report detailed Iran's past commitments to stop enriching uranium, its decision to go ahead and its refusal to comply with a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions demanding that it halt its work. It also detailed questions Iran has refused to answer about evidence that it may have worked on the difficult problems of developing a warhead small enough to fit on a missile.

"Since August 2008, Iran has declined to discuss the above issues with the agency or to provide any further information and access" to locations and scientists, the report said.

"Altogether," it said, the accumulated evidence of weapons work and lack of explanatory cooperation "raises concerns about the possible existence in Iran of past or current undisclosed activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile."

The 2007 intelligence estimate that Iran had ceased work on a weapon was controversial from the beginning. While the intelligence agencies have never renounced that conclusion, several of President Obama's top national security advisers have said they do not believe the American intelligence estimate. Many in the Bush administration also questioned that conclusion.

A European diplomat who works with the nuclear agency praised the report as tough and more tightly written than some of the more equivocal assessments of the past, under the direction of Mohamed ElBaradei. "It restricts Iran's ability to spin," said the diplomat, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The new language makes it harder for Iran to cherry-pick the report."

The agency's report disclosed Iranian work on uranium metal at an institute in Tehran and at Iran's sprawling atomic center at Isfahan, where it said Iran planned to build several production lines.

The Institute for Science and International Security, a private group in Washington that tracks nuclear proliferation, said in a report on Thursday that the new lines at Isfahan "raise suspicions that Iran could use them to make metal components for weapons."

In its report, the institute also questioned Iran's moving most of its stocks of low-enriched uranium into the plant at Natanz, which is doing the high enrichment. The transfer, it said, implied that Iran planned to enrich it all to higher levels and produce "far in excess" of any fuel needed for its stated purpose of fueling a medical reactor in Tehran.

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