

Details of Talks with IAEA Belie Charge Iran Refused Cooperation

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VIENNA, Mar 20 (IPS) – The first detailed account of negotiations between the International Atomic Energy Agency and Iran last month belies earlier statements by unnamed Western officials portraying Iran as refusing to cooperate with the IAEA in allaying concerns about alleged nuclear weaponisation work.

The detailed account given by Iran's permanent representative to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, shows that the talks in February came close to a final agreement, but were hung up primarily over the IAEA insistence on being able to reopen issues even after Iran had answered questions about them to the organisation's satisfaction.

It also indicates that the IAEA demand to visit Parchin military base during that trip to Tehran reversed a previous agreement that the visit would come later in the process, and that IAEA Director General Yukia Amano ordered his negotiators to break off the talks and return to Vienna rather than accept Iran's invitation to stay for a third day.

Soltanieh took the unprecedented step of revealing the details of the incomplete negotiations with the IAEA in an interview with IPS in Vienna last week and in a presentation to a closed session of the IAEA's Board of Governors Mar. 8, which the Iranian mission has now made public.

The Iranian envoy went public with his account of the talks after a series of anonymous statements to the press by the IAEA Secretariat and member states had portrayed Iran as being uncooperative on Parchin as well as in the negotiations on an agreement on cooperation with the agency.

Those statements now appear to have been aimed at building a case for a resolution by the Board condemning Iran's intransigence in order to increase diplomatic pressure on Iran in advance of talks between the P5+1 and Iran.

Soltanieh's account suggests that Amano may have switched signals to the IAEA delegation after consultations with the United States and other powerful member states which wanted to be able to cite the Parchin access issue to condemn Iran for its alleged failure to cooperate with the IAEA.

Parchin had been cited in the November 2011 IAEA report as the location of an alleged explosive containment cylinder, said by one or more IAEA member states to have been used for hydrodynamic testing of nuclear weapons designs.

The detailed Iranian account shows that the IAEA delegation requested a visit to Parchin in

the first round of the negotiations in Tehran Jan. 29-31 and that it asked again at the beginning of the three “intercessional” meetings in Vienna for such a visit to take place at a second negotiating round in Tehran Feb. 20-21.

Soltanieh recalled, however, that during three “intercessional” meetings in February with IAEA Deputy Director General for Safeguards Herman Nackaerts, and Assistant Director General for Political Affairs Rafael Grossi, the two sides had reached agreement that the IAEA request for access to Parchin would be postponed until after the Board of Governors meeting in March.

But when the IAEA delegation arrived Feb. 20, it renewed the demand to visit Parchin, according to Soltanieh’s account.

“At the beginning of the meeting the first day, they said the director general had instructed them to give a message to us that they wanted to go to Parchin today or tomorrow, despite what we had clearly agreed two weeks earlier,” Soltanieh told IPS.

Soltanieh told the Board of Governors that the negotiating text on which the two sides were working at the Feb. 20-21 meeting provided specifically for a visit to Parchin as well as other sites in conjunction with Iran’s actions to clear up the issue of “hydrodynamic experiments” – the allegation by an unnamed member government published in the November 2011 IAEA report.

In response to the renewed request for a visit to Parchin, Soltanieh offered to let the delegation visit the Marivan site, where the same November report said the agency had “credible” evidence Iranian engineers worked on high-explosives testing for a nuclear device.

“We offered Marivan because it was the next priority,” Soltanieh told IPS, referring to the list of priority issues on which Iran was expected to take actions to be specified by the IAEA under the provision of the negotiating text.

But the IAEA delegation rejected the offer, claiming that it had been given too little time.

Soltanieh’s account reveals that the IAEA also turned down a request to stay one additional day to complete the negotiations of the new action plan. “At lunch hour the second day, we wanted them to stay another day,” he told IPS, and the delegation told them it might be possible.

But after consulting with Amano, the IAEA delegation said it could not stay.

Amano’s change of signals on Parchin and refusal to stay for a third day of negotiations were followed by condemnation of Iran as uncooperative by a “senior Western official” shortly before the IAEA Board of Governors meeting.

The official was quoted by Reuters Mar. 2 as saying, “We think there needs to be a resolution that makes clear that Iran needs to do more, a lot more, to comply with the agency’s requests.” The official called Iran’s stance during the talks a “gigantic slap in the face of the IAEA”.

In the end, no resolution was passed by the Board. Instead the P5+1 – the U.S., Britain,

France, Russia and China plus Germany – issued a joint statement urging Iran to allow access to Parchin but not blaming Iran for the failure to reach agreement.

The negotiating text as it stood at the end of the February round of talks, which Soltanieh showed IPS, had relatively few handwritten deletions and additions.

A key provision in the draft text, which IPS was allowed to quote, says, “Iran agrees to cooperate with the Agency to facilitate a conclusive technical assessment of all issues of concern to the Agency. This cooperation will include inspections by the Agency, additional meetings, including technical meetings and visits, and access to relevant information, documentation and sites, material and personnel.”

The primary issue standing in the way of final agreement, according to Soltanieh, was whether the IAEA could reopen issues once they had been resolved. The text shown to IPS includes a provision that IAEA “may adjust the order” in which issues were to be resolved and “return” to issues even after they had been resolved.

The Iranians accepted the right of the IAEA to adjust the order but did not agree that it could reopen issues once they were completed satisfactorily, Soltanieh recalled, because Iran feared that giving the IAEA that power would lead to “an endless process”.

The other major issue, according to Soltanieh, was Iran’s demand that the IAEA “deliver” all the intelligence documents alleging that it had carried covert weaponisation activities to Iran before asking it for definitive answers to the allegation. The IAEA delegation said they couldn’t produce all the documents at once, he told IPS.

Iran then agreed that the agency could provide only those documents relevant to each issue when it comes up, the Iranian diplomat recalled. It is not clear, however, whether the IAEA has agreed to that compromise.

The United States has refused in the past to agree to turn over the “alleged studies” documents to Iran – a policy that Amano’s predecessor, Mohamed ElBaradei had argued made it impossible to demand that Iran be held accountable for explaining those documents.

After Soltanieh’s presentation to the Board of Governors, Amano told reporters that some of Soltanieh’s statements had been inaccurate but appeared to confirm the main points of his presentation. “In fact, the February talks initially took place in a constructive spirit,” he said. “Differences between Iran and the Agency appeared to have narrowed.”

On the second day, Amano said, Iran had “sought to re-impose restrictions on our work,” which he said “included obliging the Agency to present a definitive list of questions and denying us the right to revisit issues, or to deal with certain issues in parallel, to name just a few.”

Amano’s spokesperson Gill Tudor declined to comment on the accuracy of Soltanieh’s account for this story, saying “(W)e would prefer to let the director general’s words speak for themselves.”

In response to a request for comment on this story, the U.S. State Department deferred to Amano’s account on the talks but said, “(D)espite the IAEA’s best efforts, Iran was unwilling to reach such an agreement” and had “failed an initial test of its good faith and willingness

to cooperate by refusing an IAEA request to visit Parchin....”

*Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, “Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam”, was published in 2006.

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