

Developing Countries protest Israeli attacks on IAEA

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Nonaligned states protest Israeli attacks on IAEA Wed 21 Nov 2007, 14:41 GMT

By Mark Heinrich VIENNA, Nov 21 (Reuters) - Developing nations have protested to the International Atomic Energy Agency's governing board over Israel's accusations that IAEA Director Mohamed ElBaradei was showing complacency over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Israel called for ElBaradei to be replaced after he told a French newspaper two weeks ago that Iran was 3-8 years away from a nuclear bomb — assuming it wanted one, which it denies — and there was still plenty of time for diplomacy to restrain Tehran.

In a letter ahead of an IAEA board meeting on Thursday, states from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the related G-77 said "senior officials of one government", an allusion to Israel, were interfering in the U.N. watchdog's work.

Israel's criticism was "aimed at misleading international public opinion by projecting a negative, partial and wrong perspective of the work of the IAEA and its director... both recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize", they wrote.

It was a first look what are likely to be sharp divisions at the IAEA governors' meeting between developing and Western nations over how to interpret last week's IAEA report on Iran, arch-foe of Israel and its ally the United States.

ElBaradei's report said Iran, after years of stonewalling U.N. investigators, had made important strides towards transparency about how it created and built up its nuclear programme, although not yet about its current scope.

It said Iran was also expanding uranium enrichment rather than heeding U.N. demands for suspension until it can better show the programme is not a cover for building nuclear bombs as major Western countries suspect.

Iran says it wants only electricity from enriched uranium.

IAEA GOVERNORS DIVIDED

Western powers, while welcoming Iran's gestures to clarify past activity, will focus in the 35-nation board debate on the report's negative aspects that they regard as grounds for widening U.N. sanctions against Iran, diplomats said.

But board members from NAM will emphasise Iran's increasing openness and reject "interference" in IAEA efforts to coax full cooperation from Tehran and defuse tensions, they

said.

“Interference” alludes to Western criticism of Iran’s transparency process with the IAEA as fixed more on the past than the present, and Western-Israeli pressure for harsher sanctions to isolate the Islamic Republic.

An Israeli deputy prime minister called ElBaradei’s actions “irresponsible and slow” after he said there was still plenty of time to use diplomacy, dialogue, incentives and sanctions to restrain Iran and re-establish trust.

But the developing states had full confidence in the IAEA and its inspectors’ “impartiality and professionalism”, the developing nation groups wrote in their letter.

“Based on this confidence, (we) once again strongly reject any undue pressure or interference in the agency’s activities by any member states, especially in its verification process, which will jeopardise its efficiency and credibility,” they said.

Israel and the United States have not ruled out military action against Iran, whose leaders have called for the Jewish state’s destruction. ElBaradei has said that would be “crazy”.

After Israel’s criticism, France reaffirmed full support for ElBaradei and IAEA efforts to get to the bottom of Iran’s activity, reflecting the general position of world powers. (Editing by Michael Winfrey)

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