

Iran Unloading Fuel From Russian-built Reactor

February 27, 2011

The  Moscow Times

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran said Saturday that it was having to remove nuclear fuel from the reactor of its only nuclear power station, signaling more problems for the Russian-built Bushehr plant after decades of delay.

Iran's nuclear envoy Ali Asghar Soltanieh told the ISNA news agency that Russian engineers who built the plant on Iran's Gulf coast had advised that the fuel be unloaded for tests. The plant's head said it was being removed for safety reasons.

"Based on Russia's request to run tests and technical measures, the fuel will be unloaded from the core of the reactor and will be returned to it after completion of the tests," Soltanieh said.

A source close to the project said the fuel was being unloaded on the suspicion that metal particles from nearly 30-year old equipment used in the construction of the reactor core had contaminated the fuel.

"We're talking about particles of about 3 millimeters in size," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Some of the equipment used in the construction has been sitting around for 30 years. The fuel has to be unloaded and examined to make sure no metal particles have gotten into it," he said.

The fuel could take six days to unload, he said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, which mentioned the fuel problem in a confidential report seen by Reuters on Friday, would supervise the unloading procedure, Soltanieh said.

A senior Iranian official said earlier this month that suggestions should be investigated that the Stuxnet computer worm, believed to have been an attempt by Iran's enemies to sabotage the nuclear program, had caused harm to the 1,000 megawatt Bushehr reactor.

That was after Russia's NATO ambassador said the computer virus could have triggered a nuclear disaster on the scale of the 1986 nuclear accident at Chernobyl in Ukraine.

Further delays could be an embarrassment not only to Iranian politicians, who have made Bushehr the showpiece of Tehran's peaceful nuclear ambitions, but also for Russia, which would like to export more of its nuclear know-how to emerging economies.

Hamid-Reza Katouzian, head of the Iranian parliament's energy committee, blamed Russia for the delays. "The Russians' repeated breach of promise and irresponsibility in the Bushehr project continue unabated," he told Sharq daily.

"Although Iran has spent 1 1/2 times more than it should have on the Bushehr power plant, there is still no news of the commissioning of the plant and its power generation."

Iran is under international sanctions because of fears that its nuclear program is aimed at making atomic weapons, something it denies.

The UN atomic watchdog, the IAEA, has received new information regarding allegations that Iran may be seeking to develop a nuclear-armed missile, the agency said in a report voicing deepening concern about the issue.

The confidential document made clear Iran's determination to press ahead with sensitive atomic activity despite four rounds of UN sanctions since 2006, saying the country had informed the IAEA it would soon start operating a second uranium enrichment plant.

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