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Iran Continues to Defy UN Nuclear Sanctions

Wednesday, 22 Jun 2011 01:27 PM

By Ken Timmerman

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Iran continues to procure large quantities of sophisticated materials for its nuclear and missile programs from China, despite U.N. sanctions.

A new report on sanctions violations by a U.N. panel reveals that China attempted to ship a large quantity of aluminum powder used in solid rocket fuel propellant to Iran last September that was intercepted by Customs authorities in Singapore.

The report, by the panel of experts established pursuant to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, has been blocked from public release by a U.N. Security Council member, but Newsmax has obtained a leaked copy.

In addition to the rocket propellant, which was shipped from Ningbo, China, to an end-user in Iran, the report reveals that Iran also purchased a large quantity of a specialized bronze mesh from a Chinese company that was caught en route in South Korea.

U.N. experts concluded the material "could contribute to enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy water-related activities," the report states.

The mesh was purchased by Petane Chemistry Industry, which appears to have ties to Iran's oil industry and offices in Tehran and Tabriz. The company recently took down its website.

The panel warns that Iran continues to procure raw materials and equipment for its nuclear program that are "only partially controlled on the Nuclear Suppliers Group lists or fall below thresholds for controlled items."

The report says the panel "has acquired from several member states information regarding some of the more critical items that are necessary to sustain and advance Iran's gas centrifuge enrichment program, many of which are difficult for Iran to produce indigenously."

Newsmax has learned that before sanctions were imposed, Iran had placed annual orders with companies in Europe and Asia for 100,000 high-speed vacuum valves, enough to build more than 30,000 centrifuges per year.

Iranian front companies were also seeking to buy specialized components to drive the vacuum system at the enrichment plant.

The former chief inspector at the International Atomic Energy Agency, Olli Heinonen, warns that knowledge of Iran's nuclear activities is "deteriorating."

"We know every day less and less about Iran's nuclear activities," Heinonen told Newsmax in

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an exclusive interview this week. “Their capability has certainly improved with time, and with no additional protocol, the IAEA’s knowledge is deteriorating.”

The additional protocol, which Iran signed in December 2003, gave the U.N. nuclear watchdog organization the ability to conduct surprise inspections anywhere on Iran’s territory in search of suspected nuclear weapons-related activity.

Iran renounced the protocol in February 2006, after the IAEA visited a number of uranium gas centrifuge manufacturing workshops on the grounds of Iranian military factories, and asked embarrassing questions as to where Iran had purchased the sophisticated materials and know-how needed to build the enrichment devices.

The IAEA believes Iran has installed around 8,000 centrifuges at its declared enrichment plant at Natanz and built around 2,000 more, most of which were destroyed during manufacturing.

It would need an additional 3,000 centrifuges to equip the new Fordo enrichment plant, built into the side of a mountain near Qom, that it was forced to reveal two years ago after the United States and France discovered its existence.

Iran recently announced that it has been building large quantities of centrifuge parts at Taba, a previously unknown production plant north of Tehran near Karaj.

“We have never been to Taba,” Heinonen said. “But Iran has been making the moving parts [for centrifuges] for 10 years.”

Heinonen said he was confident that the IAEA would detect a large shipment of maraging steel. “There are quite a few manufacturers, but if you buy 50 tons of high-strength maraging steel and say that it’s for cars, that’s a huge amount of cars. So it would stand out,” he said.

Smaller quantities could get through, although buying from different supplies would pose additional problems of quality control and homogeneity, he added.

But large quantities of maraging steel may already have reached Iran, busting what Heinonen believes is a key supply chokepoint.

In 2009, the Manhattan district attorney indicted a Chinese businessman and his company, LIMMT, for selling 28.5 tons of maraging steel to Iran.

The indictment states that the Iranian buyer, a subsidiary of the military’s Defense Industries Organization, “paid 50 percent of the purchase price of the maraging steel rods in advance of shipment,” and notes that the shipments “were in direct contravention of the international guidelines set forth by the [Nuclear Suppliers Group] and the [Missile Technology Control Regime].”

The materials shipped by LIMMT “were consistent with materials used in the production of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles,” the indictment states.

And China may not be the only supplier Iran has found. Dusseldorf, Germany trading company, Ascotec Holding GmbH, was set up in 1990 by an Iranian state-owned steel company and has been identified as a broker for the purchase of maraging steel from Europe and Asia.

The U.S. Treasury Department placed Ascotec on its blacklist of Iranian government-controlled firms in August 2010. “Ascotec owns or controls a number of foreign companies and is part of Iran’s foreign trade network. It provides raw materials, spare parts, and machinery” to Iran’s Ministry of Industry and Mines, the Treasury Department said in a press release announcing the designation.

Uzi Rubin, an Israeli missile expert who tracks international procurement for missile and nuclear programs, points to India’s success in finding an alternate source of maraging steel, a key element used for missile casings and for centrifuge rotors, even though its sale to countries of proliferation concern is prohibited by the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

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“The fact that the Indians got them means that somebody is offering them on the market,” Rubin told IranWatch, a program of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control.

Former IAEA Safeguards chief Heinonen is scheduled to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Iran’s nuclear programs on Thursday.

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