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Iran Has Centrifuge Capacity for Nuclear Arms, Report Says

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A week before Iran's presidential election, atomic inspectors reported Friday that the country has sped up its production of nuclear fuel and increased its number of installed centrifuges to 7,200 — more than enough, weapon experts said, to make fuel for up to two nuclear weapons a year, if the country decided to use its facilities for that purpose.

In its report, the International Atomic Energy Agency said that it had found no evidence that any of the fuel in Iran's possession had been enriched to the purity needed to make a bomb, a step that would take months.

But it said that the country had blocked its inspectors for more than a year now from visiting a heavy-water reactor capable of being modified to produce plutonium that could be used in weapons. It also said that Tehran had continued to refuse to answer the agency's questions about reports of Iranian studies obtained by Western intelligence agencies that suggest that its scientists had performed research on the design of a nuclear warhead.

Iran is required under three United Nations Security Council resolutions to cease the enrichment of uranium and to provide answers to those questions. The Iranian authorities have vigorously denied the authenticity of the studies on warhead design.

The report, one of a series made quarterly to the agency's board, described how the pace of enrichment and the installation of new centrifuges is accelerating at an enormous underground bunker in the desert at Natanz. It said that nearly 4,920 centrifuges were currently enriching uranium, and that 2,300 more were ready to go. That represents an increase of 30 percent in the total number of installed centrifuges since a February report.

Campaigning for re-election next week, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has vowed that he will never bend to demands from the West or the United Nations that Iran halt its uranium enrichment. His political opponents have largely agreed, but have urged a more cooperative attitude.

Meanwhile, Israel is constantly assessing Iran's capability of producing a nuclear weapon. Last year, it asked the Bush administration for the equipment needed in case it decided to take unilateral military action against Iran. Mr. Bush declined to provide the equipment.

In a separate report released Friday, the agency said it had found new evidence to support the claim that the complex that Israel bombed in the Syrian desert in 2007 was in fact a clandestine nuclear reactor. The clue, it said, was information uncovered on Syria's procurement of "a large quantity of graphite," a material that American intelligence officials have said was central to the reactor's operation.

The agency also reported its discovery of particles of uranium in a Damascus laboratory and their "possible connection" to uranium traces already discovered at the bombed desert site. Firming up that link, it added, would require further analysis.

Significantly, the agency's Iranian report disclosed an expansion not only in the number of centrifuges, but also in the production of nuclear fuel, said David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security, a private group in Washington that tracks nuclear proliferation. "They're improving the output," he said. "And they can do better" by feeding uranium into the 2,300 machines that now stand empty.

Gary Milhollin, director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, a research organization in Washington, said Iran's 7,200 centrifuges, if suitably arranged, could annually produce enough nuclear fuel for up to two bombs. "The facts on the ground continue to change," he said in an interview, "and not in our favor."

The report from the International Atomic Energy Agency noted that Iran is refusing not only to let inspectors visit a heavy-water reactor that Tehran has under construction, but also to let them verify design information about the sprawling project, as the agency's statutes require.

The report also said Tehran had refused to give access to "relevant Iranian authorities" who could address allegations surrounding Iran's research on the design of nuclear warheads. In the absence of that cooperation and enhanced powers of inspection, the report said, the agency "will not be in a position to provide credible assurance" about nuclear materials and activities.