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The Sunday Times

December 11, 2005

Israel readies forces for strike on nuclear Iran

UZI MAHNAMI, TEL AVIV, AND SARAH BAXTER, WASHINGTON

ISRAEL'S armed forces have been ordered by Ariel Sharon, the prime minister, to be ready by the end of March for possible strikes on secret uranium enrichment sites in Iran, military sources have revealed.

The order came after Israeli intelligence warned the government that Iran was operating enrichment facilities, believed to be small and concealed in civilian locations.

Iran's stand-off with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over nuclear inspections and aggressive rhetoric from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, who said last week that Israel should be moved to Europe, are causing mounting concern.

The crisis is set to come to a head in early March, when Mohamed El-Baradei, the head of the IAEA, will present his next report on Iran. El-Baradei, who received the Nobel peace prize yesterday, warned that the world was "losing patience" with Iran.

A senior White House source said the threat of a nuclear Iran was moving to the top of the international agenda and the issue now was: "What next?" That question would have to be answered in the next few months, he said.

Defence sources in Israel believe the end of March to be the "point of no return" after which Iran will have the technical expertise to enrich uranium in sufficient quantities to build a nuclear warhead in two to four years.

"Israel — and not only Israel — cannot accept a nuclear Iran," Sharon warned recently. "We have the ability to deal with this and we're making all the necessary preparations to be ready for such a situation."

The order to prepare for a possible attack went through the Israeli defence ministry to the chief of staff. Sources inside special forces command confirmed that "G" readiness — the highest stage — for an operation was announced last week.

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Gholamreza Aghazadeah, head of the Atomic Organisation of Iran, warned yesterday that his country would produce nuclear fuel. "There is no doubt that we have to carry out uranium enrichment," he said.

He promised it would not be done during forthcoming talks with European negotiators. But although Iran insists it wants only nuclear energy, Israeli intelligence has concluded it is deceiving the world and has no intention of giving up what it believes is its right to develop nuclear weapons.

A "massive" Israeli intelligence operation has been underway since Iran was designated the "top priority for 2005", according to security sources.

Cross-border operations and signal intelligence from a base established by the Israelis in northern Iraq are said to have identified a number of Iranian uranium enrichment sites unknown to the the IAEA.

Since Israel destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981, "it has been understood that the lesson is, don't have one site, have 50 sites", a White House source said.

If a military operation is approved, Israel will use air and ground forces against several nuclear targets in the hope of stalling Tehran's nuclear programme for years, according to Israeli military sources.

It is believed Israel would call on its top special forces brigade, Unit 262 — the equivalent of the SAS — and the F-15I strategic 69 Squadron, which can strike Iran and return to Israel without refuelling.

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