**Iran, Egypt ready for battle at U.N. nuclear meeting**

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April 29, 2010

Reuters

Original Source:

*http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63S0GW20100429*

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters)- Iran and Egypt are gearing up for battle against the United States and its allies over Israel and developing countries' rights to atomic technology at a major meeting on the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is expected to attend the conference, which opens on Monday and runs until May 28. He will be facing off with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who heads the U.S. delegation at the meeting at U.N. headquarters.

Diplomats expect Ahmadinejad to take a defiant stand against the United States and its Western allies, accusing them of trying to deprive developing states of nuclear technology while turning a blind eye toward Israel's nuclear capability.

The 189 signatories of the landmark 1970 arms control treaty -- which is intended to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and calls on those with atomic warheads to abandon them -- gather every five years to assess compliance with the pact and progress made toward achieving its goals.

The last NPT review conference in 2005 was widely considered a disaster. After weeks of procedural bickering led by the former U.S. administration, Egypt and Iran, the meeting ended with no agreement on a final declaration.

Analysts and U.N. diplomats hope things will be different this time and that the conference can breathe new life into a treaty that has failed to prevent North Korea from building a nuclear bomb or force Iran to stop uranium enrichment. A Pakistani-led illicit nuclear supply network and slow progress on disarmament have also highlighted the NPT's weaknesses.

Israel is presumed to have a nuclear arsenal but neither confirms nor denies having one. Like India and Pakistan, it has not signed the NPT and will not participate in the conference.

Ahmadinejad is the highest-ranking official attending the conference. He will travel to New York [ID:nN28144835] as diplomats from the five permanent U.N. Security Council members and Germany are meeting nearly every day in Manhattan to hammer out a draft resolution imposing a fourth round of sanctions against Tehran over its nuclear program.

Diplomats say the six are far from agreement as Russia and China push to dilute a U.S-drafted sanctions proposal.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUCCESS

"A successful conference would add legitimacy to the treaty at a time when its effectiveness is in doubt because of Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs," David Albright, head of the Institute for Science and International Security, said in testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs.

North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003 and tested nuclear devices in 2006 and 2009. Western powers have called for stiffer penalties for nations that withdraw from the pact, making tougher U.N. inspections mandatory, and other steps that would make it difficult for states to develop atomic weapons.

Western envoys say a successful meeting would yield a declaration that hits all three NPT pillars -- disarmament, non-proliferation, and peaceful use of nuclear energy.

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said the United States and other governments "understand the crucial importance of this conference ... and indeed the risk to the viability of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Regime if this conference, following 2005, does not make progress" in all three areas.

Western diplomats said U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, unlike that of his predecessor George W. Bush, was trying to promote a unanimous agreement at the conference.

This time, diplomats said, it was France that was actively opposing a proposed reaffirmation of disarmament pledges made at an NPT conference in 2000 -- despite public statements from Paris that it is committed to disarming.

In 2005, the Bush administration repudiated those pledges that it and the other countries allowed to keep nuclear arms under the NPT -- Britain, China, France and Russia -- had made in 2000, enraging the 118-nation bloc of non-aligned nations.

Rice said Obama's April 2009 speech in which he called for a world without nuclear weapons and a new U.S.-Russian arms reduction deal showed "how committed the United States is to the non-proliferation regime and to disarmament."

Speaking to reporters this week, Egypt's U.N. Ambassador Maged Abdelaziz praised Obama's new disarmament moves but said developing nations wanted more. He also said it was important not to focus exclusively on the nuclear threat posed by Iran.

"Success in dealing with Iran will depend to a large extent on how successfully we deal with the establishment of a nuclear-free zone" in the Middle East, Abdelaziz said.

"We refuse the existence of any nuclear weapons ... whether it is in Iran or whether it is in Israel," he said.

Egypt has submitted a working paper to the review conference demanding an international meeting with Israel's participation that would begin work on a treaty to establish a nuclear-arms-freeze zone in the Middle East.

Diplomats told Reuters that the United States, Russia and the other three permanent U.N. Security Council members were open to the idea and hope to strike a compromise with Cairo.