

Iran tests long-range missiles as nuclear crisis deepens

Clinton gives Teheran until Thursday to halt hidden nuke program or face crippling sanctions

• By YAAKOV KATZ

Iran test-fired two long-range missiles on Monday, in a move interpreted by the Israeli defense establishment as a flexing of muscles ahead of Teheran's dialogue with Western leaders, scheduled to begin this week.

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Monday's tests came on the second day of Iranian war games, increasing international concern over Iranian military

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activities and adding to a raised sense of urgency about the newly revealed uranium enrichment site Teheran has been secretly constructing near the city of Qom.

Iranian state television said the Revolutionary Guards, which controls Iran's missile program, successfully tested upgraded versions of the medium-range Shihab-3 and Sajjil-2 missiles. Both can carry nuclear warheads and can reach up to 2,000 kilometers, putting Israel, US military bases in the Middle East, and parts of Europe within striking distance.

The Sajjil-2 is Iran's most advanced two-stage surface-to-surface missile and is powered entirely by solid fuel, while the older Shihab-3 uses a combination of solid and liquid fuel in its most advanced form, which is also known as the Qadr-F1.

The Sajjil's solid fuel propellant means it can be stored for significant amounts of time in underground missile silos prior to being launched.

"Iranian missiles are able to target any place that threatens Iran," said Abdollah Araqi, a top Revolutionary Guards commander, according to the semi-official Fars news agency.

Tal Inbar, a missile expert from the Fisher Brothers Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies, said that both missiles were well known and had been previously tested. They have both also featured in Iranian military parades.

"These missiles are not new, but the test is concerning since it is another example of Iran's growing ballistic missile capability," Inbar said.

Iran conducted three rounds of missile tests in drills that began on Sunday, when shorter range missiles, such as the Fateh, were launched in a drill near the city of Qom. The drills began two days after the US and its allies disclosed the country had been secretly developing an underground uranium enrichment facility. The Western powers warned Iran it must open the site to international inspection or face harsher international sanctions.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hasan Qashqavi said the missile tests had nothing to do with the tension over the enrichment site, but rather were part of routine, long-planned military exercises.

On Monday, the top US diplomat handling Asia was quoted by AFP as saying that China was coming around on the need for tougher sanctions on Iran, after talks between Chinese and US officials on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh last week.

"For the first time, really, the Chinese supported elements of our tough approach on the P5-plus-one," Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said, according to AFP.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said on Sunday that his "personal opinion" was that Iran intended to attain nuclear weapons, but also that a military strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure would be ineffectual, delaying Iran's program by one to three years at most.

Speaking of the new enrichment facility, Gates said in an interview on ABC's *This Week*: "This is part of a pattern of deception and lies on the part of the Iranians from the very beginning with respect to their nuclear program. So it's no wonder that world leaders think that they have ulterior motives, that they have a plan to go forward with nuclear weapons. Otherwise, why would they do all this in such a deceptive manner?"

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Sunday that Iran had until Thursday to agree to inspections and voluntarily halt its hidden nuclear program, or the United States and its allies would seek crippling sanctions.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-California) said on Sunday that Teheran's intention to produce weapons-grade uranium in the Qom facility had not yet been proven, but that the indications were strong.

Clinton spoke on CBS's *Face the Nation*. Feinstein appeared on *Fox News Sunday*.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana said he was concerned about the missile tests. Iran must immediately resolve issues surrounding its second nuclear enrichment facility with the UN's nuclear agency, he said.

After strong condemnations from the US and its allies, Iran said Saturday it would allow UN nuclear inspectors to examine the site.

The newly revealed nuclear site has given greater urgency to a key meeting set for Thursday in

Geneva between Iran and six major powers trying to stop its suspected nuclear weapons program. Solana said those talks were now taking place "in a new context."

Britain said Monday's test further illustrated why Europe and the US had serious concerns about Iran's nuclear intentions.

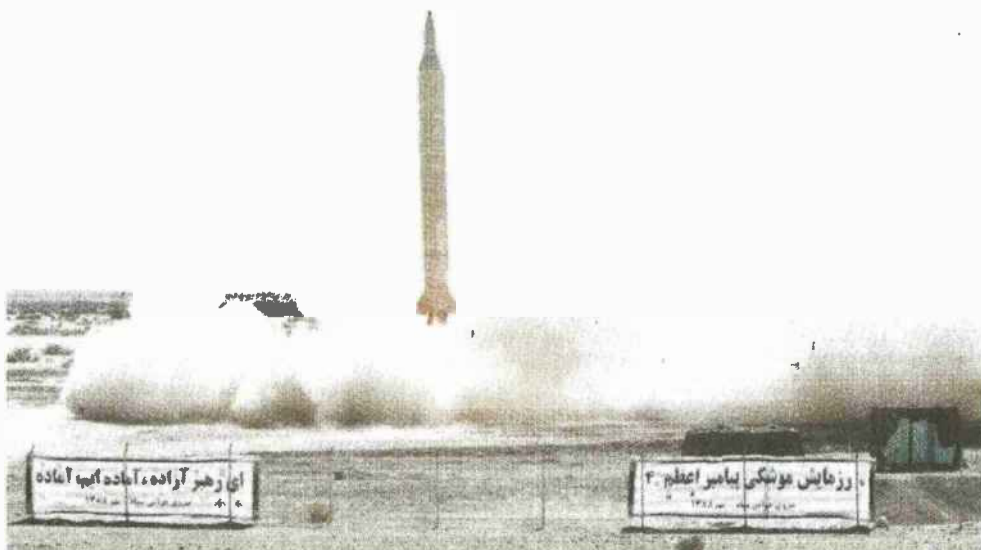
"This sends the wrong signal to the international community at a time when Iran is due to meet" the six world powers, the Foreign Office said.

The nuclear site is located in the arid mountains near the holy city of Qom and is believed to be inside a heavily guarded, underground facility belonging to the Revolutionary Guards, according to a document sent by the Obama administration to lawmakers.

Qashqavi, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, identified the site as Fordo, a village 180 km. south of Teheran. The site is 100 km. from Natanz, Iran's known industrial-scale uranium enrichment plant.

Israel has cited the latest discoveries as proof of its long-held assertion that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons.

AP contributed to this report.



AN IRANIAN Shihab-3 missile lifts off at an undisclosed location yesterday. (AP)