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Clinton greeted in Moscow with news of Iran reactor

Criticizes plan, urges Russia to postpone launch

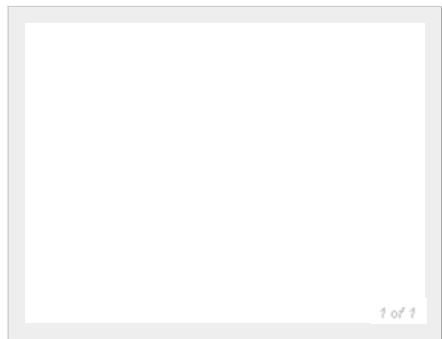
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By **Nicholas Kralev**



Russia said Thursday that it will start up a nuclear reactor it is building at Iran's Bushehr plant in the summer, drawing immediate criticism from visiting Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who officials said still hopes that Moscow will support new U.N. sanctions on Tehran.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced the Russian decision just hours after Mrs. Clinton arrived in Moscow, though it was not entirely unexpected given that the \$1 billion Iranian-Russian contract has suffered a series of delays since it was first signed in

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"The first reactor at Iran's nuclear power plant in Bushehr is to be launched already in the summer," Mr. Putin was reported as saying by Russian news agencies during a visit to the southern city of Volgodonsk.

Mrs. Clinton, who is scheduled to meet with both Mr. Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev on Friday, said their plan was not a good idea and urged them to further postpone the reactor's launch.

"Iran is entitled to civil nuclear power. It is a nuclear weapons program that it is not entitled to. And if it reassures the world, or if its behavior is changed because of international sanctions, then they can pursue peaceful, civil nuclear power," she said at a press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

"In the absence of those reassurances, we think it would be premature to go forward with any project at this time, because we want to send an unequivocal message to the Iranians," she added.

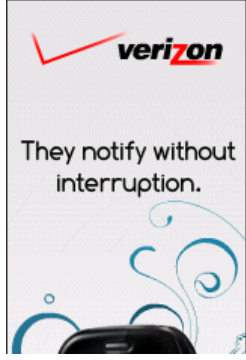
Mr. Lavrov, however, quickly rejected Mrs. Clinton's call, saying that Bushehr "plays a special



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role in maintaining" the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) presence at the plant and "ensuring that Iran is complying with its nonproliferation obligations."

"The project will be completed, and now we have entered a final phase of technological preparations," he said.

The IAEA has issued several critical reports of Iran's failure to come clean on its nuclear ambitions in recent years, and Western diplomats and nonproliferation experts are not sure Russia's project will make a significant difference.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, called Mr. Lavrov's argument "weak," saying that Russia's presence at Bushehr "is not going to persuade Iran to change course."

"Iran has failed to answer key questions from the IAEA and has continued to expand its nuclear capacity," he said. "It's a reward to move ahead [with the reactor] at a time when we should send a stern signal that the international community won't tolerate further defiance."

Analysts also said it is not clear that Moscow will make good on its intention for the 1,000-megawatt reactor after years of delays - even though the official reasons for them have been technical, diplomats and observers suspect that Russia has used the contract as leverage in relations with Iran. Bushehr would be Iran's first nuclear power plant.

"Bushehr has been a festering wound between the Russians and Iranians for years," said Justin Logan, associate director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "The Russians have engaged in foot-dragging, gamesmanship, and a general lordly attitude with respect to their involvement in Bushehr, announcing and then walking back statements that it was coming online for years."


Russia has indicated in recent months that it would support new sanctions against Tehran in the U.N. Security Council, where it has veto power. U.S. officials, who have been drafting a sanctions resolution in New York, along with other permanent council members, said they expect Moscow's position will not change because of Bushehr.

The only problematic vote is China's, which is worried about oil supplies and its broader trade relationship with Iran.

Another item on Mrs. Clinton's agenda is the completion of a follow-on to the recently expired Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty. U.S. and Russian negotiators are said to have made substantial progress in Geneva in recent days, and State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said Thursday that only one or two issues remain to be resolved.

"We are beginning our discussions about where and when our two presidents will sign the [post]-START agreement, but we don't want to get ahead of ourselves," Mrs. Clinton said. "First, our negotiators have to sign on the dotted line."

On Friday, Mrs. Clinton will attend a meeting of the Quartet of Middle East negotiators, including representatives of the United Nations, European Union and Russia.

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