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SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMED ELBARADEI

'We Are Moving Rapidly Towards an Abyss'

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United Nations chief weapons inspector Mohamed ElBaradei spoke to SPIEGEL about Iran's last chance to convince the world of the peaceful nature of its nuclear program, his problems with the US government and his fear of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists.

ElBaradei, 65, an Egyptian diplomat with a law degree from New York University, has been the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 1997. Working on behalf of the UN, Baradei's job is to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons.

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SPIEGEL: Mr. ElBaradei, the international community suspects that Iran aims to build nuclear weapons. Tehran denies this. Have we now reached the decisive phase in which we will finally get an answer to this central question of world politics?

Mohamed ElBaradei: Yes. The next few months will be crucial for the overall situation in the Middle East. Whether we move in the direction of escalation or in the direction of a peaceful solution.

SPIEGEL: You have been given a central role. The new report on Iran by your International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) could lead to more severe sanctions against Tehran.

ElBaradei: The international community will have to make that decision. We can only deliver the facts and our assessment of the situation. There are hopeful and positive signs. For the first time, we have agreed, with the Iranians, to a sort of roadmap, a schedule, if you will, for clarifying the outstanding issues. We should know by November, or December at the latest, whether the Iranians will keep their promises. If they don't, Tehran will have missed a great opportunity â€” possibly the last one.

SPIEGEL: The US government has described Iran's new willingness to cooperate as a transparent attempt to distract from its true intentions and from its continued development of the capabilities to produce a nuclear weapon. Is the IAEA too gullible?

ElBaradei: I am familiar with these accusations. They are completely untrue. It's not possible to manipulate us. We are not naýve and we do not take sides. Our new Iran report also shows that the Iranian government is not adhering to the requirements set forth by the UN, which demanded an immediate stop to uranium enrichment.

SPIEGEL: It is a proven fact that Tehran has spent years trying to keep the international community in the dark over important aspects of its nuclear program.

ElBaradei: That's right.

SPIEGEL: Your deputy, Olli Heinonen, who negotiated with the Iranians, is now talking about a breakthrough, a "milestone." Given Iran's history, wouldn't a healthy dose of suspicion be appropriate?

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ElBaradei: Obviously we are all pushing for the same strategic goal: That Iran should not get nuclear weapons. We consistently searched for evidence that Iran intends to build nuclear weapons. We found suspicious signs, but no smoking gun. We could now make some progress in setting aside these suspicions by thoroughly inspecting the Iranian facilities and learning details about their history.

SPIEGEL: What do you expect from Tehran?

ElBaradei: We expect information about the scope and nature of its uranium enrichment program and its statements about certain suspicious studies we have. The most decisive element in our assessment will be whether Iran cooperates with us completely and actively.

SPIEGEL: It appears that Iran has fewer centrifuges up and running than experts had assumed until recently. Some say there are substantially fewer than 3,000, which is considered the minimum to produce enough material for a bomb within one year. Have the scientists encountered problems with the technology, or is the surprisingly low number a sign of political accommodation?

ElBaradei: Both possibilities are valid. My gut feeling tells me that Iran has responded positively to my repeated demands that it scale back the program.

SPIEGEL: Aren't there other questions where you are still in the dark?

ElBaradei: No. We can check many things precisely. I am not willing to state definitively whether Iran is following up its promises with actions. I just don't want to lose the opportunity to find out for myself. The UN sanctions against Tehran will remain in place in the interim. It's important to exert pressure. But in addition to sanctions we must also have incentives.

SPIEGEL: Now, you believe, the time has come...

ElBaradei: ...to encourage Iran to take a new direction. Yes, that's my opinion. If someone comes to me and says, I want to work with you now, then I have to examine his offer to make sure it has substance. We must see all the documents, be able to talk to anyone and have unfettered access to all facilities. We are talking about two or three months. Then we'll know more.

SPIEGEL: You are essentially asking for a time out. The Bush administration sees the issue quite differently. It wants to turn up the heat on the pressure cooker.

ElBaradei: Careful! If we turn up the heat too high the pot could explode around our ears.

SPIEGEL: Washington wants to place the Revolutionary Guards â€” an important and, in the case of nuclear policy, decisive element of the Iranian power structure â€” on a list of terrorist organizations. The Bush administration has called on foreign banks to cancel their dealings with Iran. Gregory Schulte, the American envoy to the IAEA, has made it clear that the US government wants to see tougher sanctions. Do you believe that the Russians and the Chinese will vote for more severe sanctions in the UN Security Council once they see the new IAEA report?

ElBaradei: We at the IAEA do not make these political decisions.

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SPIEGEL: But you would consider tighter sanctions to be counterproductive?

ElBaradei: I don't make a secret of that. You can only set up so many roadmaps. If there is no basis for trust, all that effort is in vain. Sanctions alone will not produce a lasting solution. What we need in the Middle East is not more weapons, but better educational opportunities and more security for people. We should remind ourselves every day of the terrible situation of Iraq's civilians. An improvement in the catastrophic situation in Baghdad, with its tens of thousands of civilian casualties, can only be achieved through political measures â€" through concrete improvement of the population's living conditions and through opportunities for education and jobs. And, most of all, by politically involving the neighboring countries.

SPIEGEL: The Iranian leadership insists on its right to enrich uranium, and every country that has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) is entitled to this right, at least formally.

ElBaradei: There are concrete suspicions against Iran. That's why I believe that Iran has temporarily forfeited this right, and that it will have to regain it with the international community through confidence-building measures. On the other hand, those in the West must realize that if all they expect is confrontation, they might as well forget dialogue â€" and they should not be surprised if the other side seeks retribution.

SPIEGEL: Some politicians and senior military leaders in Israel, as well as in the United States, are seriously considering an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. French President Nicolas Sarkozy has also threatened to bomb the facilities. What do you think about the "military option?"

ElBaradei: Nothing at all. Perhaps a large part of the Iranian facilities could in fact be destroyed. But something like that would trigger a terrible conflagration in the region, and it would certainly strengthen the positions of those in Tehran who favor the development of a nuclear bomb. After presumably withdrawing from the NPT, they would then pursue such a program without any monitoring whatsoever. The already deep conflicts between the Islamic world and the West would explode. We need the opposite: an intensive dialogue involving all major players, the Europeans and especially the United States.

SPIEGEL: Iran is your most difficult problem child, but certainly not the only one. North Korea...

ElBaradei: ...was, until recently, seen as equally threatening. I am a long way from declaring all concerns over Pyongyang's nuclear program resolved. But the development there is positive. The Yongbyon reactor, which is the most important one when it comes to bomb production, has been taken offline under IAEA supervision. This is all the result of intensive negotiations conducted with the regime by the major powers and neighboring countries.

SPIEGEL: One could see it that way. But one could also say that dictator Kim Jong Il expelled your inspectors, violated his obligations, tested a bomb and thereby blackmailed the international community.

ElBaradei: I am not defending the regime in North Korea, just as the issue is not a ranking of governments that are more or less acceptable to me. But in Pyongyang the desire to obtain the ultimate weapon also arose from a feeling of insecurity and the idea that outside forces planned to topple the regime, as well as the desire for security guarantees. The outcome of the six-party talks with North Korea was decisive. After five years of talking to each other, it remains indisputable that dialogue brought an easing of tensions and, once its nuclear arsenal has been completely eliminated, will bring Pyongyang back into the fold of the IAEA. This could succeed through political pressure, combined with economic incentives.

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SPIEGEL: Isn't this sending the wrong message to the world's despotic rulers â€" acquire nuclear weapons or seriously threaten to develop a nuclear weapons program and you'll be taken seriously?

ElBaradei: There is that risk. But, on the other hand, in order to seem credible to the nuclear wannabe states we must demand steps toward nuclear disarmament from those who have nuclear weapons â€" an obligation that is stipulated in the nonproliferation treaty but is not complied with. I deplore this two-faced approach. If practically all nuclear powers are modernizing instead of reducing their arsenals, how can we argue with the non-nuclear states?

SPIEGEL: You visited North Korea in March when you believed that things had taken a decisive turn for the better. Do you see yourself â€" under similar conditions â€" traveling to Tehran toward the end of the year?

ElBaradei: I would have nothing against traveling to Tehran tomorrow. But while the North Koreans have complied with the UN's wishes and are being rewarded for this positive behavior, I currently see the Iranians in a sort of trial period â€" with an uncertain outcome.

SPIEGEL: Do you have a good feeling about the fact that the French president is putting a nuclear reactor in the desert for Libya's ruler?

ElBaradei: I am not familiar with the details of the deal, and whether I like or trust Moammar Gadhafi is irrelevant in this context. Libya is a member of the IAEA, and we will be able to monitor the reactor.

SPIEGEL: What apparently cannot be monitored or can only be monitored highly inadequately is the nuclear black market. It was just revealed that China has "lost" eight kilograms of weapons-grade uranium. Enriched uranium also keeps turning up in the states that emerged from the bankrupt Soviet Union.

ElBaradei: Yes, that is unfortunately the case.

SPIEGEL: There is already speculation that al-Qaida is seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. Do you think there is a real risk that terrorists will obtain the ultimate weapon?

ElBaradei: That's my greatest concern, a horror scenario. I'm not thinking about a nuclear weapon. No terrorist organization has the necessary know-how or potential to acquire these weapons. But a small, so-called dirty bomb containing radioactive material, detonated somewhere in a major city, could cost human lives and set off massive terror with serious economic consequences. Sometimes I think it's a miracle that it hasn't happened yet. I pray that it remains that way.

SPIEGEL: You are in a conflicting situation. The IAEA's job is not just to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and inspect nuclear facilities, but also to promote the civilian use of nuclear energy. However, nuclear power plants are generally considered dangerous, and there is still no way to permanently store radioactive waste.

ElBaradei: Every technology comes with a residual risk. It's very low in modern nuclear power plants. I know that some countries have a psychological problem with nuclear power...

SPIEGEL: ...the Germans, for example, are very skeptical, and the government has plans to begin getting out of nuclear energy. In your opinion, should we continue to rely on nuclear power, especially in light of such incidents as the recent earthquake in Japan that affected the world's largest nuclear power plant?

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ElBaradei: We are monitoring the situation there. The Japanese reactor shut itself down automatically, thereby demonstrating its capacity for functioning correctly in an emergency. But I cannot impose rules on any country. You in Germany apparently have the option of structuring your energy mix largely as you please. For other nations, particularly in the Third World, new energy sources are critical to survival. Look at India. The only way the more than 300 million Indians who live on less than $1 a day can significantly improve their standard of living is through the rapid growth in environmentally safe energy.

SPIEGEL: India never joined the NPT, and it tested a nuclear weapon in 1998. The IAEA is not even allowed to inspect India's civilian plants, not to mention its military ones. And yet the United States now wants to supply Delhi with new nuclear technology and fuel. Why didn't you object to this deal?

ElBaradei: I was even in favor of it. I am not a purist or a dreamer. India became a nuclear power, and it was ostracized internationally for a time as a result. This no longer makes any sense. We would consider it progress if we could monitor India's civilian nuclear power plants in the future, and we will likely begin negotiations on this issue with Delhi soon, provided the deal isn't cancelled as a result of domestic political disagreements first.

SPIEGEL: You have headed the IAEA for 10 years now. Has your job become easier or more difficult over the years?

ElBaradei: More difficult. We pay completely inadequate attention to the important threats, the inhuman living conditions of billions of people, climate change and the potential for nuclear holocaust. We stand at a crossroads, and we are moving rapidly toward an abyss. There are currently 27,000 nuclear warheads in the world. If we don't change our way of thinking, John F. Kennedy's prediction that there would be 20 nuclear powers will soon come true. And with each new player and each new weapon, the risk of a planned or accidental nuclear war increases.

SPIEGEL: What would you like to see as your legacy?

ElBaradei: I am in favor of a multinational procedure in matters of uranium enrichment and reprocessing. Ultimately, no single country should be in a position to independently produce nuclear material.

SPIEGEL: Now you must be dreaming.

ElBaradei: We must never forget that the dispute over nuclear weapons is not a game, but deadly serious. It can easily lead to a catastrophe and jeopardize the basis for the existence of all mankind. We need an international system of security guarantees, in which no country depends on nuclear weapons. We cannot wait any longer for this to happen. Not a day longer.

SPIEGEL: Mr. ElBaradei, thank you for this interview.

The interview was conducted by Dieter Bednarz and Erich Follath

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