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Iran Said to Have Covert Nuclear Facility

By DAVID E. SANGER and HELENE COOPER

PITTSBURGH — President Obama and the leaders of Britain and France will accuse Iran Friday of building a secret underground plant to manufacture nuclear fuel, saying the country has hidden the covert operation from international weapons inspectors for years, according to senior administration officials.

The revelation, which the three leaders will make before the opening of the Group of 20 economic summit here, appears bound to add urgency to the diplomatic confrontation with Iran over its suspected ambitions to build a nuclear weapons capacity. Mr. Obama, along with Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, will demand that Iran allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to conduct an immediate inspection of the facility, which is said to be 100 miles southwest of Tehran.

American officials said that they had been tracking the covert project for years, but that Mr. Obama decided to make public the American findings after Iran discovered, in recent weeks, that Western intelligence agencies had breached the secrecy surrounding the project. On Monday, Iran wrote a brief, cryptic letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency, saying that it now had a "pilot plant" under construction, whose existence it had never before revealed.

In a statement from its headquarters in Vienna on Friday, the atomic agency confirmed that it had been told Monday by Iran that "a new pilot fuel enrichment plant is under construction in the country."

The agency said it had requested more information about the plant and access to it as soon as possible. "The agency also understands from Iran that no nuclear material has been introduced into the facility," said the statement said.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said nothing about the plant during his visit this week to the United Nations, where he repeated his contention that Iran had cooperated fully with inspectors, and that allegations of a nuclear weapons program are fabrications.

The newly discovered enrichment plant is not yet in operation, American officials said, but could

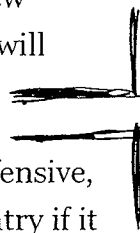


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be next year.

Mr. Obama's planned announcement with Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, due to take place at 8:30 a.m. in Pittsburgh, will probably overshadow the meeting of the Group of 20, whose leaders have gathered to plan the next steps in combating the global financial crisis. Instead, here and during the opening of the United Nations in New York, senior officials from several of the countries were pulled aside for briefings on the new intelligence and for strategy sessions about the first direct talks with Iran in 30 years that will include the United States.

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American officials said they expected the announcement would put the Iranians on the defensive, and that it would make it easier to build a case for international sanctions against the country if it blocks inspectors or refuses to halt its nuclear program.

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"They have cheated three times," one senior administration official with access to the intelligence said of the Iranians late on Thursday evening. "And they have now been caught three times."

The official was referring to the revelations by an Iranian dissident group that led to the discovery of the underground plant at Natanz in 2002, and the evidence developed two years ago — after Iran's computer networks were pierced by American intelligence agencies — that the country had secretly sought to design a nuclear warhead. That effort is believed by American officials to have been ordered halted in late 2003.

Mr. Obama appears to have crossed a psychological threshold on Iran, and in recent days he appears to have made a leap toward viewing tough new sanctions against Iran as an inevitability, after months of talking about the need for engagement.

Mr. Obama avoided President Ahmadinejad at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly this week, despite promises made during the presidential campaign and after he came into office that he would seek dialogue with Iranian leaders. Instead, Mr. Obama spent much of his time in New York pressing the case to leaders, particularly those of Russia and China, that time had run out for Iran and that the Security Council would soon need to impose tougher sanctions to seek to rein in Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

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For years, American intelligence officials have searched for a hidden site where Iran could enrich uranium in secret, far from the inspectors who now regularly monitor activity at a far larger plant at Natanz. A highly classified chapter of the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's suspected nuclear weapons work that was provided to the Bush administration identifies more than a dozen suspected nuclear sites around the country — some for building centrifuges and other equipment, others for designing weapons or testing explosives. Administration officials could not immediately say if this site, built inside a mountain near the ancient city of Qum, one of the holiest Shiite cities

in the Middle East, is included in that list.

The facility is not complete, though American officials said late on Thursday night that they believe it was designed to hold about 3,000 centrifuges, the machines that enrich uranium for nuclear power plants — or, with additional enrichment, for bombs. That would be just enough centrifuges to manufacture about one bomb's worth of material a year, though it is unclear whether any of the centrifuges have been installed or turned on.

The I.A.E.A. statement said Iran had told the agency the new plant would enrich uranium to a level of 5 percent — high enough for nuclear fuel, but not nearly enough to make the fissile material for an atomic bomb. Iran assured the agency that “further complementary information will be provided in an appropriate and due time,” the I.A.E.A. said.

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American officials, citing the sensitivity of their intelligence gathering on Iran, declined to say what kind of intelligence break — human spies, computer or telephone intercepts or overhead photography — led to their discovery. But parts of the computer networks belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard were pierced in 2007, leading to the intelligence finding that that Iranian engineers, working under Mohsen Fakrizadeh, had tried to design a nuclear weapon before the effort ended in 2003. Israel and some European intelligence agencies argue that the work resumed later.

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The enrichment program appears to run on a separate track from the weapons design program, in part because the Iranians claim the enrichment is solely for the purpose of producing fuel for nuclear power plants. To construct centrifuges, Iran has had to buy specialty parts abroad, and at times in the past, American, German and Israeli intelligence agencies have intercepted shipments, in one case diverting crucial parts to American weapons labs before sending them on to Iran. It is very possible that infiltration of the supply network contributed to the discovery in Qum.

Still, accusing a country of building a secret facility can be risky. The Clinton administration accused North Korea of having an underground nuclear facility in 1998; by the time American inspectors were let in, the facility had been cleaned out and its exact role in North Korea's nuclear weapons program remains a mystery today. President George W. Bush famously accused Saddam Hussein in 2002 of seeking to restart Iraq's nuclear program, but was never able to produce any persuasive evidence that he had done so.

Iran is a different kind of case: Inspectors have been in and out of the country for several years, always assured by Iran that it had come clean about its facilities after hiding them for nearly 18 years. Thus, the newly discovered facility could be difficult for Iran to explain: It is too small to be used efficiently to produce fuel for power plants, and appears to have been designed in such a way that its operations could be hidden.

Mr. Obama was first briefed on Iran's project before he became president, as part of the detailed intelligence reports provided by the then-director of national intelligence, Mike McConnell. Mr. Obama has received updated intelligence on it "several times," one senior aide said Thursday evening.

In advance of Friday morning's announcement, Mr. Obama sent top intelligence officials to brief the I.A.E.A.'s chief inspector, Olli Heinonen. Other American diplomats and intelligence officials shared their findings with China, Russia and Germany, all important players in the negotiations with Iran.

Earlier this week, Mr. Obama's discussions with President Hu Jintao of China on Tuesday and his meeting with President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia on Wednesday focused largely on Iran, administration officials said. During his meeting with Mr. Medvedev in particular, Mr. Obama pressed his case, expressing pessimism that talks scheduled for next week with the Iranians over the nuclear issue would yield much progress, administration officials said.

"The president made clear that while he was willing to engage, he was also clear-eyed about the prospects of that engagement," a senior administration official said.

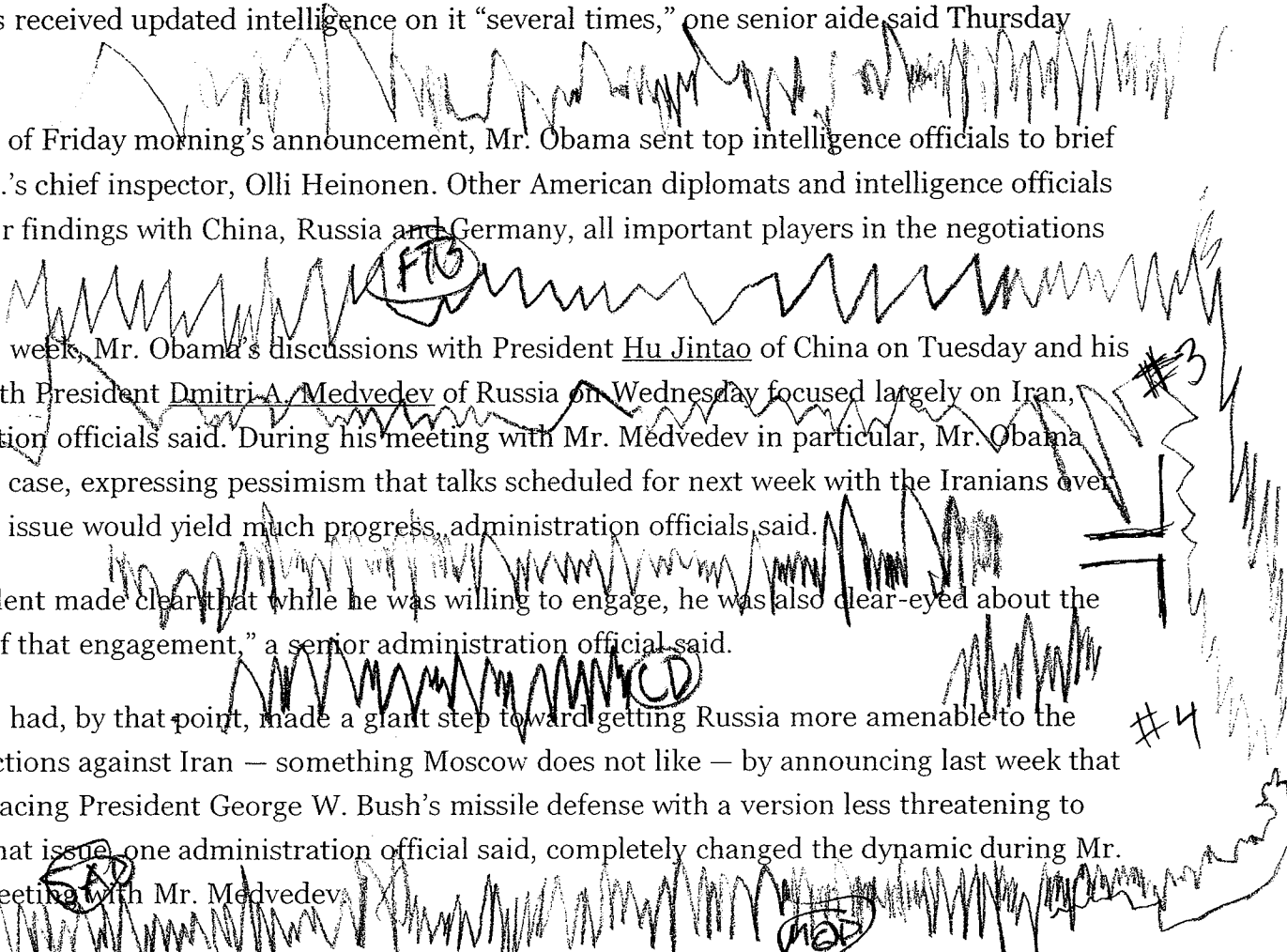
Mr. Obama had, by that point, made a giant step toward getting Russia more amenable to the idea of sanctions against Iran — something Moscow does not like — by announcing last week that he was replacing President George W. Bush's missile defense with a version less threatening to Moscow. That issue, one administration official said, completely changed the dynamic during Mr. Obama's meeting with Mr. Medvedev.

While it is unclear whether Mr. Obama briefed Mr. Medvedev about the Qum facility during that meeting at New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel, the two leaders nonetheless emerged with Mr. Medvedev promising, for the first time publicly, that Russia would be amenable to tougher sanctions.

And on Thursday, in Pittsburgh, Mr. Medvedev reiterated his stance. "When all instruments have been used and failed, one can use international legal sanctions," Mr. Medvedev told students at the University of Pittsburgh. "I think we should continue to promote positive incentives for Iran and at the same time push it to make all its programs transparent and open. Should we fail in that case, we'll consider other options."

One administration official said that the United States was hoping that with Russia on board the idea of tougher sanctions, China would follow. Mr. Obama is planning to visit Beijing and Shanghai in early November, just around the same time that a sanctions resolution is expected to be introduced at the Security Council.

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It is a far cry from the time when Mr. Obama first made waves with his views on Iran policy, back in 2007, when he said during a Democratic debate in Charleston, S.C., that he would, as president, be willing to meet without preconditions with Iran's leaders, and that the notion of not talking to one's foes was "ridiculous."

Indeed, he came into office and made a series of overtures to the Iranian regime, sending a videotaped message in the spring to wish the regime and the Iranian people a Happy Nowruz, or new year, lifting restrictions on American diplomats' interactions with their Iranian counterparts and sending two letters to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, urging warmer relations between America and Iran after 30 years of enmity.

"The response we got was, shall we say, chilling," one administration official said. In particular, the Iranian government's handling of the presidential elections in June solidified the belief among Mr. Obama's top Iran officials that it was time to toughen up on the country, the official said.

Alan Cowell contributed reporting from Paris.

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