

Cuba, allies defend Iran

Cuba and other nonaligned nations are critical of international pressure to ramp up investigations and sanctions on Iran.

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VIENNA, Austria --

Nonaligned nations on Tuesday rejected "interference" in attempts to close the file on Iran's past nuclear activities -- an allusion to U.S. concerns about the International Atomic Energy Agency's newest Tehran probe. But Europe sided with Washington.

Norma Miguelina Goicochea Estenoz of Cuba also expressed support for the work of the agency and its head, Mohamed ElBaradei, in her separate capacity as head of the agency's nonaligned board members.

Her statements outside the agency's 35-nation board meeting reflected the main dispute at the gathering: whether a pact committing Iran to cooperate with an agency probe of past nuclear activities will blunt attempts to pressure Tehran to scrap uranium enrichment -- technology that could be used to make a bomb.

A statement by the European Union to the closed meeting made available to media appeared to reflect that concern; it focused mostly on Iran's defiance of a U.N. Security Council ban and gave relatively short shrift to IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei's reported successes in prying answers from Iran.

NONCOMMITTAL OK

The statement said the EU has "taken note" of those efforts -- the most noncommittal of diplomatic terms that falls substantially short of approval. A diplomat who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity -- because she was not authorized to divulge proceedings at the closed meeting -- said ElBaradei subsequently left the conference, apparently to show his disapproval of the EU's lukewarm approach.

In contrast, a nonaligned statement delivered by the Cuban ambassador cited the pact under which Iran is cooperating with the IAEA as saying Iran will be treated "in a routine manner" if it holds to the agreement and fully answers all questions posed by the agency.

That would mean an end both to U.N. sanctions and the threat of new ones for Iran's refusal to end uranium enrichment -- a position strongly opposed by the United States and most other Western countries.

The United States was scheduled to speak on Wednesday.

'NONINTERFERENCE'

In comments to reporters, Goicochea Estenoz called for "noninterference in the work of the agency," adding that nonaligned countries offered "full support for the professionalism of" ElBaradei.

In her statement to delegates, she said the nonalignment movement "strongly rejects any undue pressure or interference" put upon the agency.

Washington and its allies fear too much emphasis on the pact and its successes could weaken efforts to impose new U.N. Security Council sanctions should Tehran continue defying the council and expanding uranium enrichment. They also feel the text of the pact is flawed.

But Cuba and the majority of the other nonaligned nations, which make up about a third of the board, insist the pact, agreed to last month, represents a potential breakthrough in more than four years of diplomatic maneuvering meant to reduce any nuclear threat from Iran.