



Highlights of the week

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Iran satisfied with failure of sanction talks in the West

Iranian officials were satisfied last week with the failure of the 5+1 group (US, France, Britain, Russia, China, and Germany) to agree on a new sanctions package against Iran during their meeting in New York the weekend before last.

During a press conference held last week in Tehran by Iran's foreign minister with his Georgian counterpart, Manouchehr Mottaki said that the 5+1 group's lack of agreement on imposing new sanctions on Iran would allow it to continue working with the international

community in an attempt to ease Western concerns about its nuclear program. According to Mottaki, the sanction talks showed traces of a realistic approach towards the nuclear issue (Mehr, January 18).

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast also commented on the failure of the sanction talks, saying that the talks were doomed to failure until the 5+1 group embraced a realistic approach recognizing Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy. At his weekly press conference, Mehman-Parast said that the only way to resolve the nuclear issue was to officially recognize Iran's right to a nuclear program and to let the nuclear case proceed in its legal and natural way within the framework of the IAEA (various news agencies, January 17).

An editorial published in the conservative daily Keyhan (January 18) asserts that the 5+1 group talks in New York prove once again that Western diplomacy towards Iran is based mostly on words rather than actions. Despite President Obama's attempt early in his term to show willingness to embrace a new policy towards Iran, the Americans have actually rejected talks between the two countries in the past year and assisted their supporters, opposition activists inside Iran. According to Keyhan, the "Zionists" tried to persuade the West that Iran's internal unrest must be fomented and that further sanctions must be imposed to weaken the Iranian people's connection with the regime. In practice, however, not only did the sanctions imposed on Iran not succeed in weakening the people's support of the regime, the people and the regime stand more united than ever against the Western enemy.

As a result of the failure of the New York talks, instead of formulating an agreement on sanctions against Iran, the countries expressed their willingness to hold another round of negotiations with Iran. Yet it was only several weeks ago that the West declared its unwillingness to hold further negotiations with Iran about its proposal on enriched uranium. There is no agreement about sanctions against Iran, a fact admitted even by the West. Some believe, according to Keyhan, that the reason the US is interested in imposing new sanctions on Iran is not to solve the nuclear program but to help its friends inside Iran. In Keyhan's assessment, the current strategy of the West is designed to radicalize the prevailing mood, taking advantage of Iran's internal situation to make it change its position on the West's proposal as negotiations are about to resume.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Nahavandian, head of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industry, and Mines, said last week that any further sanctions imposed on Iran would have no effect on its national economy. Addressing the 5+1 group talks in New York, Nahavandian said that sanctions formerly imposed on Iran had no effect, and that past experience proved that the

sanctions policy was ineffective, having failed to achieve any political or economic consequences (IRNA, January 17).

New TV debate show in Iran: signs of political openness or tactic for letting off steam?

A new TV debate show has been garnering strong interest in Iran over the past two weeks. Titled "Facing Tomorrow" (Roo Be Farda), the show is aired on Thursday nights on Iran Broadcasting's Channel 3. So far, the show has been the stage for several particularly heated debates between top politicians and journalists, both government supporters and government critics. Debates have been held between the reformist politician Javad Etaat and the conservative Majles member Ali-Reza Zakani; Majles member Ali Motahari, affiliated with the government's critics from the conservative bloc, and Vahid Jalili, a pro-Ahmadinejad journalist; and the reformist Majles member Mostafa Kavakabian and Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of the ultra-conservative daily Keyhan. The debates have gone into detail on various political issues, including the ongoing political crisis which started during the presidential elections. During the debates, government critics have strongly criticized the government's conduct and the suppression of the demonstrators during clashes with security forces. Government supporters, on the other hand, have attacked the reformist opposition and its leaders.

The show provoked many reactions from Iranian politicians and media. Among other things, it sparked an argument on whether the airing of the debates by the official broadcasting authority signified the regime's intention to allow greater political openness and true dialogue between political factions in light of the political crisis, or was it just a tactic designed to give a veneer of openness and allow government critics to blow off steam. It should be noted that Iran's broadcasting authority is completely controlled by the regime, with the broadcasting authority chief personally appointed by the Supreme Leader.

Majles member Ali Motahari praised the show, saying it may contribute to the appeasement of the "legal opposition", weaken radical and anti-Islamic elements working inside the ranks of the opposition, strengthen national unity between the various political factions, and increase the public's political awareness. He even suggested inviting to the show the two reformist opposition leaders, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, to speak out and help resolve the crisis and strengthen the unity of Iranian society (Farda, January 17).

Ali Asgari, a former Majles member and member of the Center for Strategic Studies in the Expediency Discernment Council, also welcomed the TV debates, going as far as to say that the broadcasting authority should have aired them months ago to help resolve internal

differences of opinion. Asgari suggested inviting to the show senior politicians affiliated with government critics from the conservative bloc, including Mohsen Reza'i, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and former Revolutionary Guards chief, and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran (Farda, January 18).



TV debate on "Facing Tomorrow"
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAG3EaLLQt4>)

On the other hand, Emad Afrough, a former Majles member and strong critic of President Ahmadinejad, expressed doubt whether the debates would continue to be shown for much longer. Afrough said he hoped that the TV debates were part of a long-term strategy rather than just an expression of tactics, and that the debate participants would maintain a fitting culture of speech to avoid giving the broadcasting authority a pretext to cancel the show (Tabnak, January 17).

The daily E'temad also questioned the true intentions behind the broadcasting authority's decision to allow the debates. An article published in the daily last week suggested that the broadcasting authority's decision did not stem from an honest desire to resolve the political crisis, but was rather the result of a temporary need to better compete against foreign media broadcasting to Iran in Persian (E'temad, January 17).

Some government supporters from the conservative bloc also had reservations about the show. The conservative daily Resalat, for example, strongly criticized the TV debates, warning the heads of the broadcasting authority that they could be taken advantage of by the reformist opposition to continue anti-government incitement. Continuing to air the debates, says an editorial published in the daily, is ignoring the presidential elections results, and may lead up to more opposition-staged riots (Resalat, January 16).

It should be noted that during the last presidential elections, Iranian TV showed several particularly heated debates between the four presidential candidates. The most intense

debate took place between President Ahmadinejad and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, which descended into personal attacks and mud slinging between the two candidates.

Internal security forces chief threatens action against people who use text messages and e-mails to organize disruptions of public order

Internal security forces chief Esmā'il Ahmadi-Moqaddam issued a warning last week that all text messages and e-mails used by opposition activists to organize disruptions of public order and illegal demonstrations were monitored by the internal security forces. Speaking at a press conference held during an Iranian police convention on January 14, Ahmadi-Moqaddam said that the authorities intended to take stricter measures against those who use text messages and e-mails to organize "illegal gatherings" than against their participants. He further stated that in the wake of the Ashura riots, the internal security forces and the judiciary would no longer take a tolerant approach to those who disturb public order.

Ahmadi-Moqaddam warned those responsible for organizing public order disruptions not to be certain that they have the ability to prevent government monitoring of text messages and e-mail correspondence sent by them through proxy servers. Opposition activists must assume that all their correspondence is being fully monitored by the authorities, the internal security forces chief said (ILNA, January 15).

Ahmadi-Moqaddam's statement drew criticism from government critics. Asr-e Iran, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative bloc, claimed last week that the statement allegedly contradicted clause 25 of the Iranian constitution, which bans wiretapping and exposing the contents of civilians' letters, correspondence, and telephone conversations. According to Asr-e Iran, it would be fitting if the internal security forces chief gave Iranians clarifications about the authorities' policy on that issue. If it was just monitoring specific centers for sending text messages and e-mail correspondence, then it was acceptable and justified provided the judiciary gave its authorization, but if the monitoring encompassed all text messages and e-mail correspondence, then it was a different matter deserving of further thought (Asr-e Iran, January 16).

Ali Motahari, the chairman of the Majles Media Committee, also had reservations about the internal security forces chief's statement, saying that wiretapping and monitoring text messages and e-mail correspondence could only be performed on a warrant issued by the judiciary and only when it was called for. According to Motahari, the laws of the Islamic republic are designed to protect the privacy of each individual. He added that complete

monitoring of all telephone conversations, text messages, and e-mails was technically impossible (Tabnak, January 18).

Since the outbreak of the political crisis following the Iranian presidential elections, the authorities have on several occasions imposed strict limitations on text messaging. At times they have even blocked the service altogether in an effort to restrict the ability of reformist opposition activists to use text messages for organizing demonstrations and disruptions of public order. In addition, last November the internal security forces chief warned that his organization intended to increase monitoring of web surfers in Iran. At the same time, reformist websites reported that Iranian website operators had been threatened by the authorities to cease using the Internet for transferring illegal information, or information that may compromise "state security".

In the past, officials in Iran's Ministry of Telecommunications denied government monitoring of text messages sent by Iranians. In December 2006, the former Deputy Minister of Telecommunications Vafa Ghafarian noted that the Iranian authorities were unable to store such a large quantity of text messages sent by the country's residents, and that they therefore could not filter them or monitor their contents.

Meanwhile, last week reformist opposition activists declared Wednesday, January 20, as "Green Silence Day", in protest of the continuing oppression by the authorities and wiretapping of opposition activists. The activists announced that on that day Iranian Telecommunications Company should be boycotted and the various telecommunications services should be avoided, including landline and cellular telephones (conversations and text messaging) and Internet services.

"Clean Air Week" marked in Iran as air pollution crisis escalates

On the backdrop of the "Clean Air Week" marked last week in Iran, Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the escalating air pollution crisis in Iran, particularly in the capital city of Tehran, where excessive air pollution levels were recorded last week as well. An article published by the ILNA news agency said that since the beginning of the current Persian year (March 2009), there were approximately 40 days with recorded "unhealthy", "extremely unhealthy", or "dangerous" air pollution levels. The news agency quoted a health and air pollution expert from Tehran's Shahid Beheshti University saying that air pollution was responsible for about 5000-6000 deaths in Tehran every year. Various studies also indicate that residents of Tehran are much more prone to suffer heart attacks compared to the national average, and that the life expectancy of Tehran residents is five years lower compared to the rest of Iranians.

Iran is ranked 17th (out of 133 countries) in air pollution levels. In 2000 it was decided to implement a plan to reduce air pollution in Tehran within a decade; however, not only did the situation not improve, it even grew worse (ILNA, January 18).



"Clean Air Day" in Tehran, January 19

The reformist daily Mardom Salari also addressed Iran's air pollution crisis last week. According to data released by the daily, contaminants released from vehicles and factories have driven Iran's air pollution levels to 8.2 times the world standard. The daily complained that even though it's been 16 years since the government's decision to relocate the polluting factories in Tehran away from the city, only 30 percent of the program has actually been implemented. In addition, there has been a constant increase in the number of polluting vehicles in the city, which caused further escalation in Tehran's air pollution crisis (Mardom Salari, January 14).

Air pollution is one of the most severe environmental problems in Iran, particularly in the capital of Tehran but also in other cities. Over 80 percent of pollutants come from vehicles. Most of the vehicles used in Tehran are over 20 years old. Many of them are locally made and run on very low-quality fuel, thus heavily contributing to air pollution.

The air pollution is exacerbated by the city's physical location, as the Alborz Mountains to the north of Tehran trap the polluted air inside the city itself. The damage caused to Tehran's ecosystem in the last two decades by urban development projects has been a contributing cause to pollution, making Tehran one of the most polluted cities in the world. In recent years, the city has been shut down several times due to abnormal pollution levels. Iranian authorities have tried to combat air pollution by imposing restrictions on the use of private vehicles, expanding the subway system, and minimizing the use of low-quality fuel, but those attempts have failed so far.

Picture of the week: aid shipment sent by Iran's Red Crescent to Haiti earthquake victims



The Iranian Red Crescent website (www.rcs.ir/Persian), January 16