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Iran threatened to halt snap inspections of its nuclear sites by the United Nations if its nuclear program is referred to the Security Council. The protocol allows intrusive and short-notice inspections of the country's nuclear sites. The move came after the United States, Britain, France and Germany said Thursday that nuclear talks with Iran were at a dead end and the issue should be brought before the Council.

The crisis over Iran's nuclear program intensified this week after Iran removed seals at three nuclear facilities following a two-year freeze. Iran says its nuclear programs are solely for the peaceful generation of electricity.

- Hashemi Rafsanjani, former president of Iran:

"Now the subject is very serious and sensitive and is the top issue. It seems that they, the West, don't want the Islamic country to have the new technology and want them to be backward. But we are determined to have this technology."

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urged the UN Thursday to confront what she called Iran's "defiance" over its nuclear program.

- Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State:

"We also agree that the removal of seals by the Iranian Government, in defiance of numerous IAEA Board resolutions, demonstrates that it has chosen confrontation with the international community over cooperation and negotiation. As the EU-3 and EU have declared, these provocative actions by the Iranian regime have shattered the basis for negotiation.

We join the European Union and many other members of the international community in condemning the Iranian Government's deliberate escalation of this issue. There is simply no peaceful rationale for the Iranian regime to resume uranium enrichment. We're gravely concerned by Iran's long history of hiding sensitive nuclear activities from the IAEA, in violation of its obligations, its refusal to cooperate with the IAEA's investigation, its rejection of diplomatic initiatives offered by the EU and Russia and now its dangerous defiance of the entire international community

This is Massachusetts Senator John Kerry.

- Sen. John Kerry (D - MA):

"Ultimately if we are not able to find any diplomatic resolution in the next weeks I don't think we have any choice but to take it to the international community. I think Iran has made a very dangerous and a very silly decision and it is inviting confrontation not with the United States but with the global community that cares enormously about the control of nuclear weapons."

Meanwhile, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan stressed that diplomatic talks with Iran were still on the table.

- Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General:

"First of all, I think we should try and resolve it if possible in the IAEA context and El Baradei is working with the parties doing his best to try to resolve it there. Once that process is exhausted it may end up in the council and I would leave it to

the council to decide what to do if it were to come here. I wouldn't want to preempt that. And my own, I have been talking to all the parties to negotiate a settlement and really keeping people at the table and try to discourage escalation. My good offices are always available if I need to do more and the parties so wish I will do it."

For the latest on Iran we are joined by:

- Ervand Abrahamian, Middle East and Iran Expert at Baruch College, City University of New York. He is the author of several books and is the co-author of "Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth About North Korea, Iran, and Syria"

JUAN GONZALEZ: This is the former president of Iran, Rafsanjani.

HASHEMI RAFSANJANI: [translated] Now, the subject is very serious and sensitive and is the top issue. It seems that they, the West, don't want an Islamic country to have new technology and want them to be backward. But we are determined to have this technology.

AMY GOODMAN: Meanwhile, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urged the U.N. Thursday to confront what she called Iran's defiance over its nuclear program.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE: We also agree that the removal of seals by the Iranian government in defiance of numerous I.A.E.A. board resolutions demonstrates that it has chosen confrontation with the international community over cooperation and negotiation. As the E.U.-3 and E.U. have declared, these provocative actions by the Iranian regime have shattered the basis for negotiation.

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AMY GOODMAN: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. This is Massachusetts Senator John Kerry.

SEN. JOHN KERRY: Ultimately, if we're not able to find a diplomatic resolution in the next weeks, I don't think we have any choice but to take it to the international community. I think Iran has made a very dangerous and a very silly decision. And it really is inviting confrontation not with the United States, but with the global community that cares enormously about the control of nuclear weapons.

AMY GOODMAN: Meanwhile, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan stressed diplomatic talks with Iran were still on the table.

KOFI ANNAN: First of all, I think we should try and resolve it, if possible, in the I.A.E.A. context. And El Baradei is working with the parties, doing his best to try and resolve it there. Once that process is exhausted, it may end up in the council, and I would leave it to the council to decide what to do if it were to come here. I wouldn't want to preempt them. And my own -- no, I've been talking to all the parties, doing whatever I can to encourage a negotiated settlement and really keeping people at the table and trying to avoid and discourage escalation. And I will continue to do that. My good offices are always available. If I need to do more and the parties so wish, I will do it.

AMY GOODMAN: That's Kofi Annan. For more on Iran, we are joined by Ervand Abrahamian. He is a Middle East and Iran expert at Baruch College, City University of New York, author of several books and coauthor of Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth About North Korea, Iran and Syria. The professor joins us in our Firehouse studio. Welcome to Democracy Now!

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Thank you. Send Your Feedback

AMY GOODMAN: Well, can you talk about the latest, what looks like is evolving as a major crisis at the United Nations?

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Yes. I think what we're seeing are beginnings of escalation, escalation which can eventually lead to some sort of military confrontation. Because of the Iraqi war, we have the sort of the premise that wars are done by design, by intention. The Iraqi war was actually very much of an exception. Most wars come out of miscalculation, misjudgment, playing chickens, expecting the other side to climb down. And this is a classic case where the two sides have irreconcilable interests, and the two sides are going to, in fact, play chicken, expecting the other side to back down. And as far as I can see, neither side is going to back down. So along the road, military confrontation is very much likely.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And your sense of the role of China and Russia in the Security Council, if this does move now to the Security Council?

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Well, Iran, in the past, has been hoping, with the help of also India and other countries, but the bottom line is when it comes to who can offer what, of course, the U.S. can offer China and Russia far more than Iran can. So Iran is not really going to get much protection from those countries, and it probably knows that. It's willing to go along, because it feels it has other cards it can play against United States. So, Iran's actually acting from a position of strength, the way they see it. This makes it very dangerous, because they are overconfident about the situation.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And the New York Times is reporting that Israel, behind the scenes, is pressing very hard on this issue of Iran. But the hypocrisy of many of these western countries, raising these issues about Iran's nuclear program, while Israel's nuclear program goes basically unnoticed or not targeted by any of the other major powers.

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Yes. And it's not, of course, only Israel. Pakistan has nuclear weapons. As is often -- Israel constantly says Israel lives in a dangerous neighborhood. But actually Iran lives in the same dangerous neighborhood. Although Iran is adamant that it has no interest, intention of building the bomb, clearly what the policy is to have the capabilities of building the bomb, if necessary.

And this is directly related to Iran's experience during the Iraqi war, when the Iraqis were using weapons of mass destruction and the international community didn't lift a finger. In fact, countries like United States helped Iraq use these weapons on Iran, actually sold the materials and looked the other way and denied the fact that Iraq had been using it. And from this experience, the Iranian decision makers have come to the conclusion that they need to be self-reliant. And if they're ever in a situation like that again, they would be able to build a bomb.

But that doesn't mean they want to build a bomb now. In the nuclear business, it's known as the Japanese option. Japan has this option, within a few months, of building a bomb, because it has all the equipment, it has the science, it has the knowledge. And this Japanese option, actually, some 30 countries in the world has it, and I think the strategy of the Iranian leadership is to be in the same position.

AMY GOODMAN: Why do you think it unsealed, pulled the seals now?

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Well, I think this has been building up. I mean, Iran -- voluntary -- it kept on insisting this was a voluntary freeze while they're negotiating with the Europeans. And those negotiations really went nowhere, mainly because it was -- Europeans were doing it for [inaudible] the United States. The United States was not involved. And since they discovered that basically they were freezing it indefinitely, it was not in their interest. So this is, for them, a time to do it. And, of course, what they see is the U.S. quagmire in Iraq. They feel that United States really can't do anything at the moment, and this is a perfect situation to go ahead.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Professor Ervand Abrahamian of Baruch College, has co-written the book, *Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth About North Korea, Iran and Syria*. In news, the Times of London reported that Israel's armed forces have been ordered by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon -- this was in December -- to be ready by the end of March for possible strikes on secret uranium enrichment sites in Iran. Israel has denied the report.

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Yes, it actually doesn't really matter whether U.S. does the strike or Israel does it, because Iran would obviously retaliate. And it really can't retaliate against Israel, but it could easily retaliate against United States, so if Israel carries out air strikes, it will be the United States that will suffer for it.

And the pain for the United States will come predominantly in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both countries, Iran, to use the jingo language, they have the assets, got a great deal of assets to cause a lot of trouble for United States. And the last thing, I think, the U.S. military wants in Iraq is a Shia revolt while they're dealing with a Sunni revolt.

AMY GOODMAN: You've talked about -- or I'd like to ask you about the President of Iran's comments on Israel, saying the Holocaust is a myth, saying Israel should be wiped off the face of the map, perhaps it should be established in someplace like Alaska. Your response?

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Well, there are actually two explanations for this. One is this type of thinking is pretty current among rightwing in Iran. And the right wing in Iran is no more sophisticated than the right wing elsewhere. They pick up a few things from information about history, and they elaborate to a Holocaust denial, so every time in Europe someone questions a thing about the Holocaust, it's picked up in the rightwing newspapers in Iran as a major fact. So Ahmadinejad very much comes from that perspective, the questions about the Holocaust.

Then, the question is: Why is he being so adamant and insistent on it now? And I think that's a more interesting issue. If you look at it in the Middle East arena, in the Sunni Arab world Iran is seen as a collaborator with United States. This may sound strange in United States, but from their perspective, what's happening in Iraq is the government is set up in Baghdad, is a Shia government, pro-Iranian, but it's also working together closely with United States. I think this is a

marriage of convenience that's not going last long, but from the Sunni, especially rightwing Sunni fundamentalist perspective, the Shias and the Iranians are actually in cahoots with United States.

Now, to basically overcome this stigma, the President in Iran is being more anti-Israeli than the Arabs. So if you can come out with these statements, you could say, 'Well, look, I'm actually more pro-Palestinian, I'm more pro-Muslim, I'm more pro-Arab, I'm more anti-Israeli than you are, because I'm denying the Holocaust, I'm denying the legitimacy of Israel.' And this is, again, from a rightwing Iranian perspective.

The more moderates, liberals, reformists had for a long time come to the conclusion that a two-state solution was the best thing. And the former president had actually gone on record as saying that anything the Palestinians accepted, Iran would have to accept, too. So if the Palestinians wanted a two-state solution, recognize Israel, it's not really the task of Iran to sabotage that and say, no. But I think here what Ahmadinejad is trying to do is like being more Catholic than the Pope, being more anti-Israeli than the Palestinians and the Arabs, as a way of forestalling the criticism that Iran is working with United States.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And in terms of North Korea, obviously the focus now, once again, on Iran and a nuclear program in Iran has basically forced North Korea out of the news. You hear virtually nothing about it anymore, and the United States policy of bringing this case to the U.N., while continuing to keep North Korea sort of aside in local regional talks there with some of the major powers there. Your perspective on the different approaches of the United States, of the Bush administration?

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Yes. I mean, from the people in Tehran, their perspective is, 'Look, North Korea has the bomb, and the U.S. is negotiating with it. Saddam Hussein didn't have the bomb and look what happened to him.' So within, I think, Iranian elite, there is this debate. If, once Iran gets to the point of having the capabilities, should Iran then go that stretch, one lap, and actually build the bomb? And these are sort of questions that would be raised.

In fact, what is surprising is the last few years in Iran there has been much open discussion whether one should have the nuclear capability and the bomb. I don't know any other country that ever actually has such a debate. I mean, United States, when it built the bomb, or Germany or France or Russia or China, they did it secretly. And it became a de facto thing.

But in Iran there's actually quite a sophisticated knowledge about the dangers of going that route, and there's much discussion about it, the pros and cons into it. And there are even military leaders who argue that it's not in Iran's interest to build the bomb. They all agree on it's important to have the capabilities, but to actually have the bomb is a debated issue. And many, I would say, important people would argue that it's not in Iran's interest to actually have the bomb.

AMY GOODMAN: We only have 30 seconds. But in your book you write, "The United States is on a collision course with Iran. The main casualty could well be the democratic movement in Iran." What did you mean?

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN: Well, it's already occurred. I mean, the casualty has been the democratic movement, because under the Carter and the Clinton administrations, there was actually a rapprochement, a détente. The two were pretty -- on good terms. And then you had the neo-cons coming into Washington and the "axis of evil" speech that basically undercut the reformers in Iran, because the reformers by basically -- inevitably were associated with good relations with United States. And here you have someone in Washington calling for the destruction of the Islamic republic, calling it "axis of evil." That, really a major reason for the undermining of the reformers, so that's already occurred three years ago.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, this is a conversation that we will continue. Professor Ervand Abrahamian is a Middle East and Iran expert at Baruch College at the City University of New York, coauthor of *Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth About North Korea, Iran and Syria*.