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IAEA Rebukes South Korea for Secret Nuclear Experiments

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The International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, has criticized South Korea for past secret plutonium and uranium experiments, but is not referring the matter to the United Nations Security Council.

The head of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, told reporters the agency would continue to monitor South Korea to make sure it is in compliance with restrictions placed on its nuclear program.

"The member states are seriously concerned about these experiments, in view of the nature of the experiment, the fact that they involved the separation of plutonium and the enrichment of uranium," said Mr. ElBaradei. "But the board also noted that the active cooperation by the Republic of Korea, and the fact that we have not seen any indication that these experiments have continued. So, they asked me to continue to report as appropriate."

Mr. ElBaradei reported to the IAEA board earlier this week on Seoul's nuclear experiments, which started in the 1980s and continued until 2000. The report says scientists in South Korea enriched a small amount of weapons-grade uranium, and separated a small amount of plutonium.

Mr. ElBaradei says the South Korea has promised such incidents will not occur again.

"The Korean authorities stated these were experiments conducted by scientists for scientific interest, without the knowledge of the government," he added. "Since that time, the Korean government also took a number of corrective measures, including the establishment of a new body - board - to make sure there is the precise accounting of nuclear materials. And they are also conducting a number of educational training programs to make sure the scientists and all involved in nuclear activities are fully aware of their obligation vis-a-vis the IAEA."

Mr. ElBaradei says similar cases could come to light in other countries, since more nations are signing a legal agreement with the IAEA giving inspectors broader rights of access to nuclear facilities.

Joon Oh, a Foreign Ministry official from Seoul, said the IAEA statement was a good conclusion to the South Korean case, and the issue of referral to the U.N. Security Council did not come up at the board meeting.

Meanwhile, news reports Friday said that Iran and European negotiators have reached a tentative compromise on a deal committing Tehran to freezing all parts of a program that can make nuclear-weapons grade uranium, but the government in Tehran still must approve it.