Brazil Permits Greater IAEA Inspection

Claire Applegarth

Brazil Oct. 19 granted International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors limited access to crucial uranium-enrichment technology, increasing the prospects for an end to a nearly six-month-old standoff over the South American giant’s nuclear program.

The dispute broke out in April when IAEA inspectors arrived at Brazil’s uranium-enrichment facility in Resende, near Rio de Janeiro (See ACT, May 2004) and were barred from viewing many of the plant’s centrifuge components. The inspectors were restricted to the vicinity of the plant and to monitoring the arrival and departure of uranium.

Agency inspectors who arrived at the Resende plant Oct. 19 found Brazilian officials to be more open. Brazil had announced a day earlier that inspectors would be permitted to view pipes and valves of the plant’s centrifuge while other components remained hidden behind panels. Brazilian National Nuclear Energy Commission head Odair Dias Goncalves said at a press conference in Rio de Janeiro Oct. 18 that Brazil was “very optimistic that they [the IAEA] would accept” this proposal as the IAEA was no longer requesting “total and unrestricted access.” He anticipated that inspectors would return to the country in the coming weeks to give the Resende plant final approval so that it may begin enriching uranium. The IAEA declined to comment on the inspections arrangement.

Brazil, which possesses the world’s sixth-largest natural uranium reserves, has justified such limited monitoring on the grounds that opening its facility to agency inspectors could lead to industrial espionage of what it claims is novel enrichment technology. IAEA inspectors want such access to ensure that Brazil, a signatory of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), is only enriching uranium to the low levels needed for civilian nuclear reactors rather than to the higher levels that can provide the explosive material for a nuclear weapon. According to IAEA spokesperson Melissa Fleming, visual access to the centrifuges is necessary for the IAEA to be “absolutely sure that no nuclear technology can be diverted” from the facility. Such requests also are consistent with IAEA inspection requirements elsewhere.

Informal discussions between the IAEA and Brazil had eased tensions in weeks prior to the arrival of inspectors, prompting diplomats and officials to anticipate that a written agreement would be signed formalizing the details of the inspections. No formal agreement was signed.

Brazil’s resistance to the inspections had prompted some international concerns because of its past nuclear history. It began developing a covert nuclear weapons program in 1975 but abandoned it under a new government and constitution in the late 1980s. Still, Secretary of State Colin Powell, during a visit to Brazil Oct. 4-6, expressed confidence in the peaceful nature of Brazil’s nuclear activities. Powell remarked to Brazil’s TV Globo Oct. 5 that “the United States understands that Brazil has no interest in a nuclear weapon, no desire and no plans, no programs, no intention of moving toward a nuclear weapon.” Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, at a joint press conference with Powell Oct. 5, also maintained that “Brazil has nothing to hide in terms of its uranium-enrichment process except for the technology that Brazil has acquired, and which Brazil naturally wishes to protect.”

The controversy comes as Brazil is taking on an increasingly high international profile. Brazilian diplomat Sergio Duarte has been chosen to chair the 2005 NPT Review Conference, an event that brings together all 189 states-parties to the NPT to review the last five years of the treaty’s operation and to make recommendations for its continued implementation. Brazil also is a leading member of
the New Agenda Coalition, a grouping of eight non-nuclear nations launched in 1998 with the goal of pressuring the nuclear-weapon states to fulfill their NPT disarmament obligations.

Powell’s affirmation of U.S. trust in Brazil’s peaceful nuclear intentions comes amid U.S. anxiety over Iran’s and North Korea’s nuclear programs. Department of State spokesperson Richard Boucher made it clear in an Oct. 7 press conference that Brazil’s quarrel with the IAEA over inspector access was in no way comparable to the circumstances surrounding Iran or North Korea and that “nobody should confuse them.” Powell also said he did not think the final Brazil-IAEA arrangement “would in any way give either North Korea or Iran any additional bargaining leverage power with the IAEA.”

Nevertheless, a recent IAEA request that Iran suspend its nuclear-enrichment activities spurred Brazil to come to the defense of states’ rights to pursue peaceful nuclear enrichment at the annual IAEA General Conference in late September. Brazilian Science and Technology Minister Eduardo Campos reportedly told the conference that “no initiative in this field should undermine the inalienable right of states to pursue...nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.”

Brazil has further been criticized for its sluggishness in signing an additional protocol to the NPT. The protocol would strengthen Brazil’s safeguards agreements with the IAEA by increasing the number of nuclear activities that must be declared to the IAEA and expanding the IAEA’s ability to detect covert nuclear operations. Amorim insisted that Brazil “accepted the package deal” when it became party to the NPT in 1998 and remains committed to the “basic elements” of the nonproliferation regime. Amorim also reminded reporters that “there is a process of negotiation here,” hinting that completing negotiations on limited access for IAEA inspectors would pave the way for Brazil’s acceptance of the Additional Protocol.

Brazilian Ambassador to the United States Roberto Abdenur commented in Washington in May that an “adequate equilibrium” must be sought between inspection requirements and concern for industrial secrecy before Brazil commits itself to the Additional Protocol. (See ACT, June 2004.)

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