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SPIEGEL INTERVIEW

“America’s sense of timing is different”

Chief weapons inspector Mohamed ElBaradei talks about the possibility of still preventing war in Iraq, North Korea’s nuclear plans and the danger of a worldwide nuclear arms race.

Mr. ElBaradei, 60, an Egyptian, is in charge of the UN weapons inspections in Iraq together with Hans Blix of Sweden. As the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, he has specific responsibility for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

SPIEGEL: Mr. ElBaradei, the US President has said: “The game is up.” Do you think war is a foregone conclusion, or do your inspections still have a chance?

ElBaradei: We are trying to do all we can to help prevent war. I still see a chance for peace. The most important thing is: the Iraqi Government seems to have grasped how serious the situation is. It has been co-operating with us increasingly well during the last few days - so we should not give up hope.

SPIEGEL: Saddam Hussein clearly responds only to massive pressure.

ElBaradei: That is correct. The return of the inspectors is a result of the backdrop of military threat which has been built up, mainly by the USA. The concessions are being made one by one. And we are certainly not yet fully satisfied with Baghdad’s willingness to co-operate.

SPIEGEL: Then you should really be pleading for a clearly defined ultimatum to Saddam Hussein.

ElBaradei: I am aware that impatience is increasing in many parts of the world, at different rates. There is a UN time frame, and a Franco-German one. And above all there are the Americans - they have a different sense of timing. But as long as we can report progress I see no reason why we should stop the inspections.

SPIEGEL: Because otherwise Saddam will play cat and mouse with you again, continue his concealment and deception. And because inspections surely cannot continue for ever at this level of intensity.

ElBaradei: It makes no sense to fix a precise deadline. The inspections are a process whose development is difficult to predict. But of course you are right: Iraq must recognize that it had better co-operate with us - and that it hasn't got much time.

SPIEGEL: Three weeks, three months, three years?

ElBaradei: It depends. Let me state clearly that we can determine within a few months whether or not Saddam has reactivated his nuclear weapons programme - a crucial issue, since nuclear weapons are still the worst danger worldwide. Verification in this area is comparatively easy, since we destroyed all his facilities during the last inspections from 1991 to 1998. It is more difficult with the biological and chemical weapons. To fix a precise date for these in advance is almost impossible.

SPIEGEL: Why? The onus of proof that the infernal stuff has been destroyed is on Saddam Hussein, isn't it?

ElBaradei: That is so, but technically it's not that simple with the chemical weapons and their whereabouts. Generally speaking: it has to be quick. No one is going to give Iraq another three years.

SPIEGEL: That is how long Rolf Ekeus, the former chief UN weapons inspector, said in a SPIEGEL interview that it would take to disarm Iraq completely.

ElBaradei: I am in favour of maintaining the military pressure on Baghdad. That is also covered by the UN Charter. But military pressure and actual use of force - there is a big difference. No one will say that Baghdad is co-operating 100%. But we should not belittle the progress made. Recently we have started also using U-2 reconnaissance aircraft to survey Iraq's territory. We are inspecting all the factories we want, and all the palaces, without advance notice.

SPIEGEL: Do the much-cited findings of intelligence services help you with this? Or are they mostly as useless as the satellite images presented at the UN by US Secretary of State Colin Powell?

ElBaradei: Intelligence service information did not reach us until four weeks ago, i.e. very late. Of course it would be helpful even now if we could get all the information available to intelligence services.

SPIEGEL: Iraqi scientists could help you - if they wanted, and had the courage to spill the beans.

ElBaradei: It is true that we are not yet getting the interviews we want with the Iraqi experts. They are not prepared to let us question these scientists unsupervised. If Iraq really has nothing to hide, interviews with these experts should also be possible outside the country - a demand on which we will not give in. The Iraqi parliament could pass a law requiring every scientist in the country to co-operate with the inspectors.

SPIEGEL: Maybe Baghdad views the inspectors less as the last chance to prevent war than as the extended arm of the USA. Moscow has just indirectly accused the US Government of exerting illegitimate pressure on the inspectors. Could it be that the Iraqi Government regards your people as spies?

ElBaradei: Oh, I don't think so. The politicians in Baghdad understand that we are going there on behalf of the world community, not as stooges of any particular country. Sometimes, however, they hint that they think war is inevitable, no matter what concessions they make. And then they ask why they should destroy their weapons before they are attacked.

SPIEGEL: Parts of the US Government at least do seem to think the inspections are a waste of time and would rather strike today than tomorrow.

ElBaradei: I have strongly opposed this view, most recently in the non-public part of the Security Council meeting on 14 February. I pointed out that we destroyed Saddam Hussein's earlier nuclear programme. At that time the IAEA also found out that North Korea was conducting a clandestine nuclear programme and producing more plutonium than it declared. This was a finding from our inspections - so they can't be all that useless.

SPIEGEL: North Korea is working on nuclear weapons, perhaps already has some. Doesn't Pyongyang represent a greater danger to world peace than Baghdad? And why is North Korea - unlike Iraq - being treated with kid gloves?

ElBaradei: Both North Korea and Iraq are very serious cases. Pyongyang can produce plutonium, has the technology to make nuclear weapons in a relatively short time. If North Korea has really started up the reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, then that has nothing to do with generating energy. They could produce several atomic bombs in half a year. It would be a disaster for worldwide disarmament efforts if Pyongyang were to succeed in making nuclear weapons. It would also be catastrophic if we applied double standards: North Korea must be forced to disarm unconditionally just like Iraq.

SPIEGEL: The fact is that Kim Jong Il has thrown your inspectors out of the country and withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. No one knows what exactly is going on there. North Korea can force the world to make concessions because the world is afraid of its nuclear programme. Reward for a blackmailer?

ElBaradei: Clearly there is a humanitarian crisis and a bad energy shortage in North Korea. That should be dealt with by providing aid. But independently of that, Pyongyang must allow the inspectors to return and must fulfil its international commitments. It would be disastrous to send a wrong message, telling them that blackmail with a nuclear option pays.

SPIEGEL: You have involved the Security Council, which can impose sanctions on Pyongyang. Kim Jong Il has already announced that he will regard retaliatory measures by the UN as a declaration of war. Can you take responsibility for such an escalation?

ElBaradei: Nobody wants sanctions, but the world community cannot rule out using the threat of sanctions as a last resort. Sanctions and war: those are the last, the really ultimate resort.

SPIEGEL: As to the third power in George W. Bush's "axis of evil": you have decided to visit Teheran. Is a new front looming there?

ElBaradei: Those in power in Iran say they are conducting an "ambitious nuclear programme", which according to them serves only peaceful purposes. Unlike those in Pyongyang they are willing to engage in dialogue. Teheran must be subject to the usual safeguards criteria of the IAEA. That is the only way to reduce distrust.

SPIEGEL: CIA Director George Tenet is already talking about a "nuclear domino theory". Do you see a danger that individual countries could develop into nuclear powers in quick succession? And will a terrorist organization like al-Qaeda soon get its hands on nuclear weapons?

ElBaradei: It is not as easy for terrorists to get hold of atomic bombs as is always claimed. The so-called dirty bombs are another story: they are relatively easy to manufacture, with materials that are available in many hospitals or universities. The destructive power of dirty bombs is considerably less than that of "proper" nuclear weapons. It is true, however, that there are an increasing number of countries with the technological capability of making "proper" nuclear weapons.

SPIEGEL: Are the existing arms controls not adequate?

ElBaradei: We must quickly come up with some ideas for extending and improving the safeguards system worldwide. And there is another goal we must not lose sight of: the nuclear arsenals of the nuclear-weapon States must be reduced, all of them have jointly committed themselves to that.

SPIEGEL: That really doesn't seem likely to happen. A secret plan of the Pentagon has just become known according to which the United States intends soon to start making new "mini-nukes" and to expand and rejuvenate its nuclear arsenal. Evidently that is connected with Bush's new doctrine of possible pre-emptive strikes.

ElBaradei: The discussion about a new generation of nuclear weapons is extremely dangerous. Developments must take a different direction: banning of the bomb, progressive destruction of arsenals. Otherwise there will always be nuclear have-nots saying: Why should the big countries have rights which are denied us?

SPIEGEL: In a few days the big countries may say: You've had your chance with inspections, now it's our turn in Iraq. How many days before war starts will you be informed by the White House?

ElBaradei: Thinking about something like that in concrete terms means resigning oneself to war. But of course if it comes to the worst we will not allow our inspectors to become human shields. I am responsible for all these men and women.

SPIEGEL: If the USA starts a war without UN authorization, while you think that all peaceful means have not yet been exhausted: will you resign then?

ElBaradei: I don't play mental games like that, but I won't rule anything out. I firmly believe peace still has a chance. War would mean that the whole of international politics and diplomacy had failed.

SPIEGEL: Mr. ElBaradei, thank you for this interview.

Photo captions:

1. ElBaradei at Headquarters in Vienna: *"Still a chance."*
2. Weapons inspectors in Iraq: *"Don't belittle progress."*
3. Journalists visit a missile factory near Baghdad: *"Concessions are being made one by one"*.
4. UN inspectors ElBaradei, Blix
Political pressure from the USA?