

IRAN - Q&A, 26 January 2006

Do you agree with the claim that Iran is developing a nuclear weapons programme?

We don't know if Iran is developing a nuclear weapons programme. Nobody does. The Iranian government has consistently said that they are not developing nuclear weapons arguing that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, after 3 years of inspections, says it doesn't know whether they have a weapons programme or not.

What is clear from Iran's nuclear programme is that it could be used to develop a nuclear weapons programme. All so-called civil nuclear power programmes can be diverted into nuclear weapons development. In fact this has happened many times in the past. The fact that the claimed distinction between peaceful and military nuclear technology is a lie is one of the many reasons Greenpeace opposes nuclear power.

Further Information:

Iran insists that it is simply exercising its rights under the terms of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Despite the aims of the NPT to disarm the world of nuclear weapons, the failure of the nuclear weapons states to treat that commitment seriously has led the non-nuclear states to the inevitable conclusion, that the treaty also gives signatories the 'inalienable right' to develop peaceful nuclear technologies. There is no such thing as a peaceful nuclear technology. Once a country has a nuclear power programme it is possible for it to develop a weapons programme. That's as true for Germany, Japan and Brazil as it is for Iran.

Greenpeace's position on Iran is the same as that for all countries with nuclear power or nuclear weapons – the ONLY basis for peace, security and sustainable development is to abandon nuclear programmes; and to phase out nuclear power in favour of sustainable renewable technologies – in other words, a Nuclear Free world.

So what would you say if it can be shown that Iran is developing a nuclear weapons programme?

Greenpeace would call on Iran to immediately halt its weapons programme and instead become a champion for peace. Nuclear weapons do not offer security, but increase tensions with the attendant risk of a conflict in which everyone will lose.

Our position on Iran is the same as our position on all the countries with nuclear weapons i.e.: US, UK, France, Russia, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and N Korea should immediately disarm.

Nuclear energy is dangerous, expensive and causes widespread environmental damage. It is a deadly legacy from the 20th century and all countries, including Iran, should harness 21st century renewable energy sources, such as wind, solar and geothermal, to provide the energy we need without threatening our security.

You say that other countries have used peaceful nuclear power programmes to develop nuclear weapons – which ones?

The world has witnessed the acquisition of nuclear weapons capabilities through so-called peaceful civilian nuclear programmes in India, North Korea, Pakistan and Israel.

Will there ever be a time when Greenpeace believes the military action is necessary to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state?

Greenpeace is opposed to war and violence; whether it is invasion or so called pre-emptive strikes. The path to peace is not a violent one and will never be a successful way to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction.

Diplomatic efforts have not been exhausted. Intensified efforts to address the root causes of security concerns in the region through restarting the Middle East peace processes will play an important role. The establishment of a nuclear free zone in the region is another vital step. This would tackle all the weapons in the region, as well as power programmes that can be used to mask them, and require security guarantees from nuclear weapons states outside the region.

Further Information:

It has been demonstrated over and over again that violence results in more violence; furthermore, the range, technology, sophistication, and sheer destructive capability of today's weapons really means that war, as a political tool for resolving conflict, must be abandoned.

The 1981 bombing of the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak, by Israel is a good example: - the bombing certainly delayed the programme, but it also drove it underground, with the result that whilst Osirak had been monitored by the IAEA, subsequent activities were not. Many members of the international community were very surprised by how far the Iraqi programme had developed in the 9 years following the bombing of Osirak. The Iraqi regime simply became even more determined to develop their nuclear programme following the strikes and committed to it even more human and economic resources.

Referral to the United Nations Security Council and sanctions would serve only to escalate the hostility and rhetoric and spark a series of 'tit for tat' actions from Iran and the west that will intensify the crisis. Iran for example has already said that they will suspend the IAEA's access to its suspect facilities if it is referred to the Security Council.

While Iran may be reported to the security council or even bombed, there are other countries in the region (namely Israel), and indeed the world, (such as Pakistan and India) that are not receiving the same treatment. What is your position on this?

Reporting to the Security Council and bombing are quite different! But the real issue is the contradictory nature of the international response to different countries' nuclear programmes.

Greenpeace is opposed to all nuclear programmes whether they be weapons or power programmes. And we have been publicly critical of Israel's nuclear programme, just as we are of Iran's, and the UK's, US's, Germany's Brazil's etc.

It is also clear the lack of fairness or even-handedness is making the situation worse. All nuclear states - whether they have nuclear weapons or nuclear power – must eliminate their programmes along with Iran.

Further Information:

While the nuclear weapons states fail to meet their commitment to disarm, their call for other countries to remain nuclear-weapons-free will always be open to dismissal and calls of hypocrisy, undermining their negotiating position.

When some countries are being 'trusted' with nuclear power and technology and others aren't, it is very easy for a country like Iran to retreat behind nationalist rhetoric and simply assert that it is doing nothing different to any number of other countries.

Countries like Israel, India and Pakistan all developed nuclear weapons programmes without being subject to the same level of international criticism and threat as is being heaped upon Iran. Indeed just recently India has actually received help from the US with its nuclear programme with the US agreeing to lift sanctions against India, offering access to civilian nuclear technology and cooperation, despite the fact that India developed its weapons programme through its so called 'peaceful' energy programme.

The nuclear weapons states, including the five Permanent Members of the Security Council in particular, must take a lead by diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies and taking concrete steps to eliminate their nuclear weapons arsenals – they are collectively responsible for approximately 30,000 nuclear weapons in the world today.

You suggest the NPT as a suitable framework, which should be expanded to include countries like Iran and Israel. How do you see this happening, in a way that doesn't expand the members of the nuclear club, yet does not turn its new signatories into immediate violators?

The NPT is a suitable framework because it is a global framework about the elimination of nuclear weapons. So, the question is not about how to let more countries have weapons within the NPT framework – which would be contrary to the treaty's objectives, but how to actually meet the Treaty's objective, which is a world free of nuclear weapons.

Once again, the five Permanent Members of the Security Council must lead by example: by diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies and taking concrete steps to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

Nuclear weapons states outside the NPT system, i.e. Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea also need to commit to this rejuvenated system and take steps to dismantle their arsenals.

But the NPT is not perfect and must be amended to remove the so called 'right' to peaceful nuclear energy, which has concealed so many countries' weapons programmes in the past. Without removing the NPT's contradictory support for the myth of peaceful nuclear energy the system can never be truly effective.

Further Information:

The NPT is an important global framework, but it doesn't preclude regional measures, such as nuclear free zones, which can actually enhance the chance of creating a world free of nuclear weapons.

Rather than simply waiting for nuclear weapons states to take up unilateral disarmament, Greenpeace is proposing to work region by region to establish nuclear free zones, and the Middle East is a very good place to start.

A nuclear free zone in the Middle East would tackle all the weapons and any nuclear weapons aspirations in the region, would address the nuclear power programmes that can be used to shield/hide them, and would include security guarantees from nuclear weapons states outside the region. It is this that should be on the negotiating table now, not UN sanctions.

It is often noted that the conflicts and tensions in the Middle East are related to the geopolitics of energy supply with the region being the major source of oil and increasingly gas, to the rest of the world what does Greenpeace say in relation to this issue? Surely as most of the world's economies are reliant on a constant and stable flow of oil and gas for their economies then it is important that these supplies are made secure, if necessary by military means?

The only sustainable long term solution is to phase out the use of fossil fuels and phase in the use of renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies. Not only will this help to protect the climate and reduce the pollution and health effects of fossil fuels, it will also create independence for countries currently reliant on fossil fuels from unstable areas such as the Middle East.

No one need be killed or injured for want of a wind turbine or solar panel and for this reason it is appropriate to call renewable energy peaceful energy. Every country has abundant indigenous sources of their own renewable energy.

The Middle East itself has abundant solar radiation that could power solar thermal power plants, which can provide sustainable, reliable and independent energy.

Further Information:

It is clear that one of the major reasons why there is conflict in the region is because it contains the largest reserves of easily available fossil fuels in the world. Over many decades, since the discovery of oil in region there have been battles for access to and control of these reserves.

Today two issues are increasing tensions: one is that both established and developing economies depend on increasing fossil fuel consumption; the other is that many of the reserves in other parts of the world are either mature or are declining in production.

However, not only has trying to get access to these resources caused conflict, the use of fossil fuels as a source of primary energy causes widespread environmental damage: from oil spills, to choked cities from fumes, and globally as their use dumps billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the Atmosphere. CO₂ is the number one greenhouse gas that causes global warming and climate change.

It is true that such a switch in energy sources would threaten the economies of many Middle Eastern countries that are overly reliant on the money earned from fossil fuel exports. However, now is the time when these countries need to be diversifying their economies and looking to a stable future when fossil fuels will not be the mainstay of economic development.

Some Middle East countries are beginning to recognise this. For example Egypt has a government department dedicated to the development of new and renewable energy and they are planning to build a concentrated solar thermal plant starting in 2007; the UAE government is also investing more in renewable energy sources; Israel is also a world-leader in the development of solar thermal technologies and has plans for building such a power plant; Jordan and Syria also have significant renewable energy programmes.

Turning back to Iran, clearly if Iran were to abandon its nuclear programme in favour of the development of the modern renewable energy technologies then there is no way that they could be accused of trying to develop a nuclear bomb. Nuclear technology is dirty, expensive and causes widespread environmental damage and should be confined to the dustbin of dirty 20th Century technologies.

What is Greenpeace doing in the various relevant countries on this issue?

Greenpeace is campaigning for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East and is campaigning within the region for the rapid uptake of sustainable renewable energy technologies. We are encouraging governments in the region to develop legal frameworks, which will encourage these technologies. This is the only way to ensure truly sustainable development and ultimately, contribute to peace in the region.