

Iran's President Calls Holocaust 'Myth' in Latest Assault on Jews

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By Karl Vick
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ISTANBUL, Dec. 14 -- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday called the extermination of 6 million Jews during World War II a "myth," bringing a new cascade of international condemnation onto a government that is increasingly viewed as radical even within Iran.

"They have created a myth in the name of the Holocaust and consider it above God, religion and the prophets," Ahmadinejad said in an address carried live on state television.

The speech in the Iranian city of Zahedan echoed the president's remarks at a conference of Islamic nations in Saudi Arabia last week, when he suggested that if Europeans established Israel out of guilt over the Nazi campaign, the country should be carved out of Europe.

But Wednesday was the first time Ahmadinejad declared that the Holocaust had not happened, and the assertion served to further undermine Iran's efforts to persuade other countries that it can be trusted with its nuclear program.

In Western countries, "if someone were to deny the existence of God . . . and deny the existence of prophets and religion, they would not bother him," Ahmadinejad said. "However, if someone were to deny the myth of the Jews' massacre, all the Zionist mouthpieces and the governments subservient to the Zionists tear their larynxes and scream against the person as much as they can."

Iran's official news agencies excised the offending language from transcripts of the speech in an apparent attempt by the government to limit any damage as it tries to avert U.N. sanctions over its nuclear program.

"It's really shocking that a head of state who has a seat in the United Nations can say such a thing," said Jose Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, the executive body of the European Union. He said the speech "calls our attention to the real danger of that regime having an atomic bomb."

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev told reporters: "The combination of extremist ideology, a warped understanding of reality and nuclear weapons is a combination that no one in the international

community can accept."

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said his government had summoned the Iranian charge d'affaires to issue a protest of the "shocking" remarks. The Foreign Ministry of Poland, where Nazis operated death camps where Jews were killed, said "the remarks of the Iranian president are causing even more outrage" than Ahmadinejad's statement last month that Israel should be "wiped off the map."

Since being elected on a populist platform emphasizing a fairer distribution of the country's oil wealth, Ahmadinejad has voiced fiery rhetoric that has emphasized his roots in the extreme reaches of Iranian politics.

A former mayor of Tehran, he came to the presidency with no foreign policy experience. He served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basiji militia, hard-line organizations committed to keeping alive the tenets of Iran's 1979 revolution, including rejection of ties with the West. On Thursday, Human Rights Watch, a watchdog group based in New York, issued a report linking two members of his cabinet with extrajudicial killings in the 1980s and '90s of Iranians the government regarded as disloyal.

While calls for an end to Israel have long been part of the Iranian theocracy's official creed, Ahmadinejad has turned up the rhetoric significantly, at a time when Iran is seeking international recognition in various ways. It has recently lobbied for membership in the World Trade Organization and for more foreign investment.

Iran's relations with the outside world are still complicated by its past sponsorship of terrorism. On Wednesday, a U.S. court in Washington ruled that Iran must pay \$126 million to victims of the 1983 bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut, on grounds that the country aided the terrorists who carried out the attack, news services reported.

But as a practical matter, Iran largely gave up its ambitions to lead a pan-Islamic revolution after the eight-year war with Iraq ended in stalemate in 1988 at a cost of hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives.

During the presidential campaign, Ahmadinejad "did an effective job of concealing these xenophobic, extreme views on foreign policy," said Karim Sadjadpour, an analyst for the International Crisis Group, an independent research organization based in Brussels.

"The majority of Iranians do not look fondly on these kind of musings because it reminds them of the early days of the revolution, when Iran was isolated diplomatically and economically," Sadjadpour said. "And they don't want to see a return to those days."

The speech brought a sharp criticism from reformers who dominated Iranian politics through the 1990s. But Ahmadinejad also has run afoul of fellow conservatives, notably in the parliament that was elected last year.

Lawmakers this fall turned down his first three nominees for oil minister, an unprecedented run of rejections for an Iranian president.

This week, a fundamentalist lawmaker in the national assembly expressed revulsion when neo-Nazis abroad voiced solidarity with Ahmadinejad's suggestion that Israel be "wiped off the map." The president made the comment while attending a conference aimed at reducing extremism.

"Their support of Mr. Ahmadinejad's comments is beneath the dignity of the Islamic Republic, and the government should make its position clear about this," said the lawmaker, Heshmatollah Falahatzadeh, according to an Iranian news service. "Our officials should realize that there are many facts in the world that we should not pass our judgments on in a way that the world finds fault with."

Diplomats from E.U. countries have been attempting to negotiate a deal with Iran by which it would terminate parts of its nuclear program that could be used to make weapons. Iran says that its program is solely to produce electricity.

"Ahmadinejad has been making these comments about Israel, and people are now beginning to take a look at their own policies about how they are going to deal with this regime," said a British official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with the British government's media policy.

"The kind of statements that are coming from Tehran will give everyone pause for thought," the official said.

The United States has not had diplomatic relations with Iran for 25 years, and U.S. officials said they saw little hope of engagement with the current government. "This was not an accident, this was not a slip of a tongue," a senior U.S. official said of the remarks, on condition of anonymity.

A senior European diplomat noted that the president's statements lay outside the main currents of thinking in Iran's government.

"There is a different line -- the one taken by people who handle the nuclear issue in Iran and the public statements made by the president," said the diplomat, who also spoke on condition of anonymity.

But Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the cleric who holds ultimate power in Iran's theocracy, has sent mixed signals about Ahmadinejad. In sermons that double as policy statements, he has twice said it is too early to judge the new president, who took office in August.

At the same time, Khamenei has substantially increased the authority of Ahmadinejad's sharpest critic, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the millionaire cleric who finished a distant second in the June election. At a recent prayer ceremony, observers saw great significance in Rafsanjani being assigned a conspicuous position nearest Khamenei.

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and staff writer Glenn Kessler in Washington contributed to this report.

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