

<http://www.counterpunch.org/hallinan12152010.html>

Hypocrisy Gone Nuclear

Israel, Obama and the Bomb

By CONN HALLINAN

This past July, a nuclear-armed nation, in violation of an international treaty, clandestinely agreed to supply uranium to a known proliferator of nuclear weapons. China and North Korea? No, the United States and Israel.

In a July 8 article entitled “Report: Secret Document Affirms U.S. Israeli Nuclear Partnership,” the Israeli daily *Haaretz* revealed that the Obama Administration will begin transferring nuclear fuel to Israel in order to build up Tel Aviv’s nuclear stockpile.

There is profound irony in the fact that while the U.S. and some of its allies are threatening military action against Iran for enriching uranium, Washington is bypassing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) while aiding Israel’s nuclear weapons program, the only country in the world that has actually helped another nation construct and test a nuclear device.

The saga starts with a box of tea that arrived in South Africa in 1975.

This past May, researcher Sasha Polakow-Suransky uncovered declassified South African documents indicating that in 1975 the Israeli government offered to sell nuclear warheads to the apartheid regime. Israeli officials apparently tried to block the declassification of the documents, but failed.

According to the British *Guardian*, then Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres—currently president—negotiated with Pretoria to supply South Africa with nuclear warheads for Israel’s Jericho missile. Peres dismissed Polakow-Suransky’s book—“The Unspoken Alliance: Israel’s Secret Relationship With Apartheid South Africa”—as having “no basis in reality for the claims.”

But according to Allister Sparks in *Business Day* (South Africa), the Israeli offer “to sell nuclear warheads to SA during apartheid is almost certainly correct—despite denials by key figures in both countries.” Sparks should know, because he was told what was in that box of tea by the *Rand Mail*’s lead investigative reporter, Marvyn Rees.

“I can state this because the disclosures closely corroborate information I was given 32 years ago when the late Echel Rhodie, then secretary of information, told the *Rand Daily*, of which I was then editor, how he and Gen. Hendrik van den Bergh, head of the South African Bureau of State Security, had brought what he called ‘the trigger’ for a nuclear bomb from Israel,” Sparks writes.

Sparks has remained silent all these years because he made a promise to Rhodie not to reveal the conversation, and because he was afraid of the “draconian Defense Act” that would have subjected him to prosecution. But since Rhodie and the general are dead, the Act repealed, and the story revealed, he felt it was time to come in from the cold.

According to Polakow-Suransky the warhead offer fell through because the parties were worried that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin would not go along. But Sparks argues that the “more likely explanation” was that Israel offered a “trigger,” which was cheaper, and ultimately more useful to Pretoria because it would allow the South Africans to produce their own nuclear weapons.

Apparently the Israelis also supplied South Africa with tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that enhances the explosive power of nuclear weapons.

According to Sparks, the South African general and Rhodie packed the trigger into a tea box and put it on a South African Airways plane as hand luggage.

Jump ahead four years to Sept. 22, 1979, when an American Vela 6911 satellite, designed to detect atmospheric nuclear tests, is streaking over the South Atlantic. At 53 minutes after midnight Greenwich Mean Time, near South Africa’s Prince Edward Island, it picked up the double flash of a nuclear weapon detonation. Compared to the 15 kiloton Hiroshima bomb the explosion was small, about 3 kilotons. It was also “clean”—that is, it produced very little radiation, although enough for radioactive Iodine-131 to turn up in the teeth of Australian and Tasmanian sheep several months later.

The Vela and the sheep were not the only confirmations. The U.S. Navy also picked up an acoustic signal indicating a large explosion at or under the sea at the same time and place as the Vela had detected.

The Carter Administration tried to cover up the test, but, according to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in “The Samson Option,” the explosion was a joint Israeli-South African low-yield “neutron” bomb.

The key to the test was the trigger in the tea box. According to Sparks, South Africa knew how to make a nuclear weapon, but only of the “gun” variety, the same design as the Hiroshima bomb. The “gun” uses an explosive to fire a uranium bullet at a uranium target. When the two converge, the fuel goes critical and the weapon explodes. But while the “gun” design is simple and largely error-proof, it is too big and clumsy to be mounted on a missile.

For a small warhead or a neutron bomb, you need a “trigger,” a finely engineered explosive device that wraps around a uranium core. However, triggers are devilishly tricky and a tiny miscalculation in timing results in a dud. In the 1998 round of testing by India and Pakistan, both countries produced some misfires, as did North Korea.

The Israelis were willing to exchange a trigger for something they needed: uranium yellowcake, the raw material for making weapons-grade nuclear fuel.

According to declassified documents uncovered by Polakow-Suransky, Israel also saw South Africa as an ally. In a Nov. 22, 1974 letter to the South African defense ministry, Peres wrote about the importance of co-operation between Tel Aviv and Pretoria. “This co-operation is based not only on common interests and on the determination to resist equally our enemies, but also on the unshakable foundations of our common hatred of injustice and our refusal to submit to it.”

At the time, South Africa was widely reviled for racist policies that denied full citizenship to the vast bulk of its population.

While Peres denies that Israel ever negotiated with South Africa, the Nov. 22 letter concludes by saying that he looks forward to meeting Rhodie when the latter visits Israel. It was during a meeting four months later that Peres made the warhead offer. Peres—with significant help from France—was a key figure in the establishment of the Israel’s nuclear weapons industry.

The U.S. media has focused on the warhead charge, while ignoring the far more destabilizing proliferation issue. The warheads were never sent, but the box of tea was, and the result was a nuclear explosion by a renegade regime. Since the fall of the apartheid government, South Africa has foresworn its nuclear weapons program.

Israel refuses to sign the NPT—indeed, refuses to admit it has nuclear weapons at all—thus making it ineligible to buy uranium on the world market. Article I of the Treaty explicitly forbids supplying nuclear material to a non-signatory country, which in the case of Israel makes the U.S. in violation of the NPT.

But in Washington’s efforts to line up allies against China, the U.S. has agreed to supply fuel for India’s nuclear power industry, even though India also refuses to sign the NPT. In theory, the U.S. uranium is only supposed to fuel India’s civilian sector, but in practice it will allow India to redirect all of its modest domestic uranium supplies to weapons systems. Pakistan’s request for a similar deal was rebuffed. Thus the U.S. has put aside its treaty obligations in the interests of pursuing allies in the Middle East and Asia.

Sparks argues that, “mutual collaboration” between Israel and South Africa “enabled both countries to develop nuclear weapons.” Now the U.S. has replaced South Africa in aiding Israel’s nuclear weapons arsenal—thought to be around 200 warheads—and in the process has undermined the NPT.

Not only is the U.S. in clear violation of Article I, the Treaty’s Article VI requires member states to end the nuclear arms race, but the Obama Administration has just committed \$85.4 billion to “modernizing” its nuclear arsenal. This is not what the Treaty’s designers had in mind, and, while it may not violate the letter of the NPT, it certainly runs against its spirit.

U.S. actions around Israel and India not only weaken the NPT, they make a mockery of Washington's concern about "proliferation" and bring into question President Obama's pledge to seek "peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." Diplomatic chess moves are check mating a noble sentiment.

Conn Hallinan can be reached at: ringoanne@sbcglobal.net