

Obama Says Facts Support Accusation of Iranian Plot

By HELENE COOPER

Published: October 13, 2011

WASHINGTON — President Obama vowed on Thursday to push for what he called the “toughest sanctions” against Iran, saying that the United States had strong evidence that Iranian officials were complicit in an alleged plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States.

Philip Scott Andrews/The New York Times

President Obama spoke about Iran's suspected tie to a terrorist plot during a news conference in Washington on Thursday.

In his first public remarks on the assassination scheme, Mr. Obama sought to counter skepticism about whether Iran's Islamic government directed an Iranian-American car salesman to engage with a Mexican drug cartel to kill Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States and carry out other attacks. Mr. Obama insisted that American officials “know that he had direct links, was paid by, and directed by individuals in the Iranian government.”

“Now those facts are there for all to see,” Mr. Obama said. “We would not be bringing forward a case unless we knew exactly how to support all the allegations that are contained in the indictment.”

The president did not lay out any specific new sanctions against Iran; his administration is considering a number of measures, but has limited leverage and would have to muster international support to impose anything with real teeth.

While Mr. Obama made his remarks during a news conference in the White House East Room with the South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, the State Department said that United States officials had been in direct contact with the government of Iran over the accusations.

The State Department spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, would provide no details. But Thursday night a White House official said the contact had been made by the United States ambassador to the United Nations, Susan E. Rice, who gave a letter to her Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Khazaee.

In her remarks about the alleged plot, Ms. Nuland said: “When you look at these details, it seems like something out of a movie. But as you begin to give more detail on what we knew and when we knew it and how we knew it, it has credibility.”

Mr. Obama said that the administration had reached out to allies and the international community to build support. “We've laid the facts before them,” he

said. "And we believe that after people have analyzed them, there will not be a dispute that this is in fact what happened."

The president got some support from some allied governments on Thursday. The Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, told reporters at a news conference in Vienna that "this dastardly act reflects the policies of Iran." The Saudi government has not yet decided whether to withdraw its ambassador from Tehran in protest, he said.

In London, the British foreign secretary, William Hague, told the House of Commons that the suspected plot "would appear to constitute a major escalation in Iran's sponsorship of terrorism outside its borders," British news agencies reported. He added that the British government was "in close touch with the U.S. authorities and will work to agree an international response, along with the U.S., the rest of the E.U. and Saudi Arabia."

Iran escalated its rebuttal of the American charges, saying the claims about the alleged plot were so ludicrous that even politicians and the media in the United States were expressing skepticism about them.

Iran's state-run media was dominated on Thursday by rejections of the American charges. The foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, called the charges part of a "new propaganda campaign." The official IRNA news agency quoted Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as saying: "Repeating stupid and useless methods by hopeless Western policy makers to create Iranophobia will not be fruitful and they will fail again."

While Mr. Obama echoed assertions by other administration officials that Iranian officials were complicit in the alleged plot, he did not go as far as some officials did on Wednesday when they told reporters that they had concluded that the operation had been discussed at the highest levels of the Iranian government.

Instead, the administration will try to persuade Russia, China, Europe and India to endorse tougher sanctions against Tehran. Thus far, the United States has prodded its international partners to put in place limited sanctions against Iranian officials involved in the country's nuclear program, as part of the international effort to rein in Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

But that strategy has, so far, had limited success, with Russia and China in particular wary about going too far in a direction that officials say could hurt commercial interests in those countries.

The United States does virtually no business with Iran, and that leaves American officials with few meaningful options for unilateral action. Some lawmakers in the United States are calling for Mr. Obama to try to increase pressure on Iran by punishing Russian and Chinese companies that do business with Iran's energy

industry. But the administration has resisted such a move, which would undoubtedly deeply anger Moscow and Beijing.

White House officials said they were still weighing what additional sanctions they would push for in light of the alleged plot. One possibility, administration officials said, would be to target Iran's central bank. But that likely would provoke resistance because it would entangle other countries or entities that do business with the central bank. Another possibility would be to focus on members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps who are involved in the country's oil industry. But that could affect global oil markets.

Standing next to Mr. Obama in the White House East Room Thursday, Mr. Lee gave him a measured vote of confidence on the suspected plot.

"We were deeply shocked when we read the reports on the attempt to harm the Saudi envoy here in Washington, D.C.," Mr. Lee said. "I and the Korean people strongly condemn all forms of terrorism."