

Transcript: World Stage: Ukraine with Rafael Mariano Grossi

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MR. IGNATIUS: Welcome to Washington Post Live. I'm David Ignatius, a columnist here at The Post. My guest today is Rafael Mariano Grossi, who is the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency. We'll be talking today about two issues where the IAEA is playing an important role. One is in securing the safety of Ukraine's nuclear sites. The second is the effort to restore the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear agreement. Welcome to Washington Post Live, Mr. Grossi.

MR. GROSSI: Thank you very much, Mr. Ignatius. It's very good to talk to you.

MR. IGNATIUS: So let me begin with the Ukraine issue, which is very much on all of our minds. You said this week that you hope to have a deal to protect the nuclear sites in Ukraine very soon. And I want to ask you, what are the remaining obstacles to achieving that final deal?

MR. GROSSI: Well, one has to understand that this whole situation in and around the nuclear facilities in Ukraine is incredibly peculiar, since what we have here is a number of facilities--many of them, as you know, 4 big sites, 15 reactors, and associated facilities--that are spread all over a big country, a country that is undergoing a military conflict or in a military--an active military conflict with different--with areas of the--of the country that are under the control of the Russian Federation forces, some others not. And this also applies to the nuclear facilities.

So, of course, any you can call it a deal, an arrangement, an agreement, an understanding, anything that you would like to do, would have to take into consideration this fact--the fact that you are dealing with a country, with a sovereign nation, which is, of course, subject to a military operation from another country that has even claimed control and is controlling two very important facilities, namely the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, one of the biggest in Europe, six reactors, and the famous site and the exclusion zone around Chernobyl.

So, this is unique. In 40 years of diplomatic experience in nuclear affairs, I have never seen this. And I think one could extend that to any area of international law, where you are trying to deal with a situation with the sovereign nation has lost control of two important parts that you also need to cover under some scheme to protect them. Naturally, my interlocutor when I--when I deal with Ukraine is Ukraine. My legal interlocutor is Ukraine, is the Ukrainian nuclear regulator, is the Ukrainian foreign minister, is the Government of Ukraine.

At the same time, there is a recognition here that at least as I said, in two of these places, it's not Ukrainians who are in charge. So how do you recognize these two realities? How do you reconcile these realities into something that is operationally viable, while not being politically intolerable or unacceptable for Ukraine?

Here, issues of territorial integrity, political sovereignty, nuclear safety, and nuclear security come together in an incredibly complex mix that I'm trying to untangle to try to contribute to something that we all--and I think when I say we, I would include Russia--everybody recognizes that the safety and the security of these installations is something that needs to be preserved. You can describe--yeah.

MR. IGNATIUS: So let me ask--Mr. Director General, let me ask what that deal might look like. Would it involve IAEA or other international inspectors being present to assure safety? Would it involve specific assurances from Russia? Give us some idea of what it is you're seeking here.

MR. GROSSI: Yeah, what I'm seeking is nuclear safety and security of--this is what I'm seeking, and how to get to

that. There's different layers to this. One is provide the operators, which, mind you, adding to the complexity of these are still the Ukrainian operators, even in those places which are under the effective control of Russian military forces. So, what we are doing, the IAEA statutorily--and also because it's our mission and our mandate--we do have a permanent contact with the operators, with the regulators there, and we have an established channel of communication, which serves, among other things, to produce the daily updates--more of--more than 30 at this point, that the IAEA is pulling out to see--to tell the world what's going on there.

But going back to what it takes or what we could have there, there is--there is a layer that comprises the--what we can do remotely in terms of technical advice and technical support. As you know, the IAEA as part of its work in terms of safeguards or nonproliferation, but also safety, security, not only has waste work on site. We also have remote monitoring equipment that is operational. So, we do have in real time a good impression of what is going on there. So, there is--there is a chapter that has to do with that.

There is a second big area that has to do with ensuring the supply lines to these facilities, which as any other--let alone a nuclear--as any other industrial facility requires spare parts, repairs, number of things that are at the moment interrupted because of this situation.

And lastly, what we are working is on a scheme that will allow us to have technical experts in different places and different times to do some of the above, work on the technical issues, support our Ukrainian counterparts, work with them in doing some repairs, approaching some problems that may be arising, then facilitating the safe arrival of equipment, and finally also working on the establishment of the situation on the ground. So as you can see, we have different sets of very important things that you could decline [phonetic] into many other specific tasks that we have already put together for Ukraine. So this is what we are trying to get.

MR. IGNATIUS: So it's been reported, Mr. Director General, that you've had conversations with Russian

representatives in trying to seek this safety agreement. Have the Russians been cooperative, in your mind? Are they offering you the kind of liaison and assistance that you need, first? And second, are the Ukrainians comfortable with an arrangement that includes the invading power, Russia, maintaining oversight of these areas in any way?

MR. GROSSI: Well, this harks back to the uniqueness of this situation. Of course, a great zeal must be observed in that anything that we may or may not agree, may agree or might agree to ensure the safety of the plants would not result in a crystallization of the situation or could not be construed or otherwise used as a legitimation of anything that is out of international law--in this case, namely the occupation of a foreign country.

As a diplomat--and this is one of the reasons you have diplomats at the heads of even technical organizations, although I need to be pretty good at my nuclears--you need to be extremely careful in what kind of shape and form this agreement may be so that none of these things happen. With the best good will, one could come with proposals that would complicate rather than facilitate the technical--sorry, the political problems while aiming at solving a technical issue. So this is why it's like when you are a surgeon and you are operating, you have to be sure that you touch what you need to touch and you cut what you need to cut and not the fabric and the tissue and the veins and the arteries that you don't need touch. So this is an extremely delicate exercise--which by the way, it's ongoing as we speak. So you may bear with me in that I may not be able to get into every detail, every characterization of each side's disposition, because I'm--you know, I'm operating at the moment.

MR. IGNATIUS: Understood.

MR. GROSSI: What I can--what I can--yeah, yeah.

MR. IGNATIUS: So understanding that you're--this operation is still in progress, a basic question that Ukrainians have and the world has is whether these plants are safe while they're under Russian occupation. There were fires burning near the Chernobyl reactors, and there's been concern about both locations. So just on the--on the

basic safety issue, are you comfortable now with the situation, the maintenance [unclear]?

MR. GROSSI: No, no. This is why I'm doing what I'm doing. This is why I'm doing what I'm doing, Mr. Ignatius. I'm not comfortable. If you asked me today, are these plants safe, well, in relative terms, yes. Otherwise, the IEA would have said it in today's report. But the situation is not sustainable like this. And we've had--and you described them and in the opening images we saw some of that--we have had already close calls. We have had situations that while not being close calls, were quite concerning, like, for example, the situation regarding the external power lines to Zaporizhzhia, which from five went down to two at one point. Now a third has been repaired. So, we are pretty good in that situation.

Chernobyl, we had the same situation with power down, then power was--so we are dealing with a repetition, a reiteration of events that as a responsible head of the nuclear institution in the world I must be addressing. I cannot ignore them. I cannot--I simply cannot ignore them. So, this is why I am saying--and perhaps this is uncomfortable for some--we have an issue with the nuclear safety and the security of this installation.

Let me mention something else which we haven't discussed so far, the safeguards side of this. As you know, a country with 15 nuclear reactors, it's a lot of nuclear material out there that is under our control, the control of our inspectors. And you have already heard, I'm sure, or seen allegations that some--that perhaps there were intentions or plans to develop nuclear weapons and things like that, which I dismissed when they were--when they were put forward.

But why could I dismiss them? Because I still have the operational view as an inspector of what is going on. But if this continues, and if I am not able to perform my safeguard activities as I should, and some of them cannot be performed remotely and require my inspectors to be there, then we will start having loophole--or we might have loopholes and situations where nuclear material could be unaccounted for. I don't know. And then the big question marks that this conflict is putting to all of us as

an international community could multiply. So, this is why I'm saying, as the head of the IAEA, we should act now before something happens that we will regret, a nuclear accident of nuclear uncertainty in terms of what is going on with all of this nuclear material.

MR. IGNATIUS: And let me just ask again, because of the importance of what you just said about the vulnerability of the nuclear material, that if I understand you the possibility that outsiders, even terrorists could obtain this nuclear material, how quickly do you think you can get the agreement that would provide safeguards and monitoring in place?

MR. GROSSI: I need to do it as soon as possible. I have been saying this from--almost from the very, very beginning. I, of course, understand, and I should be recognizing this, that there are incredibly important and sensitive political issues at stake here for Ukraine, and I have the highest respect for that. And I'm acting in this spirit.

At the same time, there is an issue which will, of course, put in the first line the health and the--and the conditions of the Ukrainian people. Here we are not acting to protect--I mean, the first that need to be protected and supported is the Ukrainians themselves. If something happens, it will happen first in Ukraine, then yeah, maybe people in Central Europe, where I live comfortably, could be affected. I don't know. But it's about Ukraine. And this is what we need to do.

So, I'm working very hard, night and day. And I am--you know, I can tell you that that many governments at the highest levels have also called me, expressed support for my efforts, have also been in touch with our Ukrainian friends back in Kyiv, from the president down, to try to support them and to facilitate this work of ours, which is--which is not easy. We need to have this within days.

MR. IGNATIUS: So within days gives us a clear sense of the urgency. A final question. The IAEA is part of the overall United Nations framework chartered by the Security Council. Is this an issue that's so urgent and important that you have considered with the IAEA Board of Directors referring it to the Security Council for action?

MR. GROSSI: Well, in and by itself, the whole issue of Ukraine has been put forward to the Security Council by the countries that decided to take that step. For me to do that would require action at the level of the Board of Governors and a number of decisions which would be a political process beyond my own capacity, so to speak. My function--and let me tell you, I'm doing this because of my own sense of responsibility, but also because I received a request for assistance from Ukraine which was addressed to me.

MR. IGNATIUS: So this is a very helpful summary of an urgent issue. I want to turn in the time we have remaining seven minutes or so, Mr. Director General, to the issue of Iran and the Iran nuclear agreement.

MR. GROSSI: Yeah.

MR. IGNATIUS: The IAEA has been a kind of crossroads for that negotiation now for many years. This week, the Iranian foreign minister said that a new nuclear deal with Iran and the United Nations Permanent Representatives was closer than ever before, was the language he used. State Department spokesman Ned Price said that the deal was neither imminent nor certain. So, we have a difference of opinion, seemingly. What is your own judgment as someone who observes this process closely? Do you think based on what you know that the basic elements of a new deal are close and could be achieved soon?

MR. GROSSI: The elements are there as far as--you know, there are elements that fall within the purview of the IAEA and where we have an indispensable necessary role, which is being the guarantors, the inspectors of everything that is going to be agreed. This is why we have been doing, you know, more than observing. We have been accompanying, providing technical advice and support and--until the moment our inspectors start their work.

There is also--there's obviously another part of this that that has to do with sanctions, that has to do with designations of groups and individuals, that has nothing to do with my--with my work. It's pure political, bilateral between the United States and Iran, and by impact now, hearken back to Ukraine, now with the issue of sanctions,

an added layer of complexity has been present when Russia, as you know, has raised the issue of the sanctions and secondary sanctions that might be affecting the implementation of some of this.

So, I'm not saying this not to give you an answer. I can give you a very clear, straightforward answer. For the nuclear side, I think everything is in order, by and large, to move forward. I must say, though, when I mentioned this, that that is apart from the JCPOA a number of pending issues that Iran has with us. You may have seen that I was in Tehran a few days ago. I was talking to Foreign Minister Mr. Abdollahian; the president of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Mr. Eslami, and other officials there about this, because it is obvious that you need to have a clear view of what is going on there in order all the-- everything and all processes move forward in a--in a coherent way. I think the elements are there. One could not deny that if some of these remaining issues were solved, that would be a possibility to go back to it.

In terms of the characterizations, of course, I wouldn't have an opinion of how the United States characterizes it. I only can refer to the facts. And the fact is as I see them, what I said.

MR. IGNATIUS: So the--we heard you say the elements of a nuclear agreement are there. But there's concern about Russia, in effect, evading sanctions by doing nuclear deals, business deals with Iran, if I understand it. Is there any way that your agency is seeking to resolve that issue?

MR. GROSSI: Not those ones, because we--as you know, sanctions and secondary sanctions are very--you know, it's a national prerogative that one of the signatories, or parties--in this case the United States--may or may not wish to exercise. And Russia is asking questions because, as you know, the JCPOA has--it's a very complex agreement here, as you know, very technical. It has a side which is related to controls and to limits and to inspections, but it has an incentive part at the same time in the minds of the creators of the JCPOA. There were these issues, including some activities where JCPOA partners would be helping assisting Iran in conducting their peaceful nuclear activities in a way that would not be

conducive to nuclear derivations. And for this in the--in the order of things of the JCPOA, originally it was considered that China and Russia would be helping out Iran with some of these activities, and these activities that now appear to be touched or affected in some way by the sanctions. So, the IAEA as such, unless these sites would ask us to mediate or do something about them, but I don't--it's beyond our competencies. It's a commercial law problem that needs to be solved.

MR. IGNATIUS: So, we have just a minute left, Mr. Director General, and I want to ask a final question. Based on what you've seen so far, are you confident that if the agreement whose elements appear to be in place was finally adopted, the IAEA would be able to monitor Iranian compliance with that agreement so that you could assure the world that the limits were not being violated?

MR. GROSSI: I would. Of course, I am. But I need to say one thing. The JCPOA that we are going to have to be monitoring now will be more complex than the one that was originally signed in 2015. As you know, from 2015, to now, and in particular, from 2018, when the United States unilaterally withdrew from the agreement, Iran started gradually to cease its implementation of these checks and prohibitions. So now you have an Iran that produces uranium metal. Now you have an Iran that has developed the most sophisticated centrifuges. Now you have an Iran that is enriching uranium at 60 percent, which is, in every practical sense, almost military level. So, more facilities are there in place. So, we will have our work of reconciling facts, figures. Going back to baseline is going to be huge. But of course, the IAEA, as always, will be there, and we'll be able to tell it as it is.

MR. IGNATIUS: So, we need to end it there. I want to thank the Director General of the IAEA, Rafael Grossi, for reviewing issues in Ukraine and Iran in a thorough way. Thank you so much for joining us today.

MR. GROSSI: It's been a great pleasure. Thank you.

MR. IGNATIUS: So please join us for other Washington Post Live programming about Ukraine and other major issues. Go to [WashingtonPostLive.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/) to see what we have coming up and register for it. Thank you very much

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