



IRAN SPARKS INTERNATIONAL ANGER OVER NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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European leaders are meeting to discuss what to do about Iran, the Islamic republic that recently removed seals from its main uranium enrichment facility and resumed research on nuclear fuel.

Iran said it was resuming "merely research," but the United Nations nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA, said Iran had begun small-scale enrichment of uranium, a process that can produce fuel for nuclear reactors to generate electricity or material for nuclear weapons.

Highly enriched uranium is a radioactive material used to speed up the chain reaction in a nuclear bomb. While many countries develop low-enriched uranium at nuclear plants to generate electricity, the highly enriched form suggests a weapon program.

Iran insists that the enrichment plant, which was a secret until three years ago when an exiled Iranian opposition group blew the whistle, is to generate power for electricity.

But the United States accuses Iran of developing weapons of mass destruction, despite signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970.

The European nations could refer the matter to the 15-country Security Council at the United Nations, which could then impose economic sanctions, or penalties, on Iran.

International pressure on Iran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an ultra-conservative leader who has confronted the United States and Europe in recent months, dismissed talk of possible sanctions and said Iran will "continue the path of production of the nuclear energy."

"Iranian people do not allow foreigners to block their progress," he said on the state-run radio station.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blamed Ahmadinejad for infuriating the international community by restarting nuclear activity and making provocative speeches such as one in which he said the Jewish state of Israel should be "wiped off the face of the Earth."

“The government of President Ahmadinejad has done nothing but confront the international system ever since he came into power ... with outrageous statements that I don't think have been made in polite company in many, many, many years,” she said.

Israel considers Iran its greatest threat, and has repeatedly said international diplomatic pressure is the best way to end Iran's nuclear program, with military action considered as a last resort.

China and Russia, two nations that buy a large amount of oil from Iran, urged restraint and called on Ahmadinejad to do more to build trust and restart talks.

An uneasy relationship with the West

Iran is the largest country in the Middle East with a population of 69 million. The country was known as Persia until 1935 and later became an Islamic republic after conservative clerics overthrew the monarchy.

In 1979, a group of Iranian students seized the American Embassy in the capital city of Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage to protest U.S. and Israeli policies. Known as the Iran hostage crisis, it wasn't until the day President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated in 1981 that the standoff ended.

The United States has designated Iran a state sponsor of terrorism and has imposed economic sanctions on the country.

--Compiled from wire reports and other media sources

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