Iran could halt 20 percent uranium enrichment if given fuel, officials say

• By YEGANEH TORBATI

DUBAI (Reuters) – Iran would negotiate on halting higher-grade uranium enrichment if given fuel for a research reactor, senior officials said, reviving a previous offer in a possible attempt to show flexibility in stalled nuclear talks with world powers.

The talks have made scant progress since resuming in April, leading to harsher Western sanctions against Iran and increasing talk of Israeli air strikes on its arch-adversary over concerns Tehran is covertly seeking the means to develop nuclear weapons.

The Islamic Republic’s economy is suffering from the tightened noose of sanctions, with the rial currency losing nearly two-thirds of its value to the dollar over the past year.

“If a guarantee is provided to supply the 20 percent [enriched] fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor, our officials are ready to enter talks about 20% enrichment,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said at a Eurasian media forum in Kazakhstan on Friday – according to Iran’s Press TV.

Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi told Der Spiegel earlier in the week: “If our right to enrichment is recognized, we are prepared to offer an exchange. We would voluntarily limit the extent of our enrichment program, but in return we would need a guaranteed supply of the relevant fuels from abroad.”

At the heart of Iran’s dispute with world powers is its insistence on the right to enrich uranium and that economic sanctions should be lifted before it stops activities that could lead to its achieving the capability to produce nuclear weapons.

The United States and European allies reject such conditions. They say Iran forfeited a right to enrich by having concealed sensitive nuclear work from UN inspectors and blocking their inquiry into suspected bomb research.

They also believe that dropping sanctions first would remove any incentive for Iran to come clean and negotiate seriously.

Mehmanparast spoke on the same day the EU provisionally approved yet wider economic sanctions complimenting US

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Will new EU sanctions targeting Iran make a difference?

ANALYSIS
• By BENJAMIN WEINTHAL

The European Union’s foreign ministers are slated to convene on Monday in Luxembourg to rubber-stamp a new round of energy sanctions on Iran’s vulnerable gas, financial and shipping sectors.

While the sanctions are welcomed by Mideast experts in Israel, Europe and the US, there is increasing worry that the international community, particularly the Europeans, needs to inflict more economic pain on Iran’s clerical rulers to stop their nuclear weapons program.

Speaking from the Netherlands with The Jerusalem Post via telephone on Saturday, Wim Kortenoeven, a former Dutch MP and leading European expert on the Islamic Republic’s nuclear weapons program, said that “if the Europeans want to avoid war, there is a need for more than half-measures.”

The EU member states plan to ban imports of natural gas from Iran and the export of metals such as aluminum and graphites to Tehran. European diplomats said nautical equipment and the extension of short-term trade guarantees will be outlawed. In addition, the EU plans to bar European companies from building oil tankers for Iran.

The new bank sanctions might very well cause the most damage to Iran’s shaky economy, which saw a 40 percent drop in its currency – the rial – earlier this month. Additional Iranian energy and financial companies will be covered by the new EU sanctions.

According to The Wall Street Journal, the sanctions will turn the financial screws on bank transactions: “The level of the threshold will depend on the sector, with humanitarian trade in food and medicines having a ceiling of 100,000 euros. But for many other items, any transaction over 10,000 euros with an

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plans for further financial penal-
ties.

Mehmanparast said any flexi-
bility shown by Iran should be
matched by reciprocal measures
from world powers, including full
recognition of Iran’s right to
enrich uranium, according to
Saturday’s Press-TV report.

There is no sign Iran’s readi-
ess to avert an escalation of
enrichment of uranium to a fissile con-
centration of 20% would be anywhere
near enough to satisfy the
demands of the West.

World powers want Iran to
stop 20% enrichment, shut
down the Fordow underground
centrifuge plant where this work
is carried out and ship out its
stockpile of this material.

Western officials say such ges-
tures would serve to raise confi-
dence in Iranian intentions but
more would be needed to
obtain any significant relief from
sanctions.

Iran says it needs uranium
enriched to a fissile purity of
20% for a medical research
reactor in Tehran, but this
would also overcome most of
the hurdles in terms of technol-
ogy and time to the 90% level
suitable for nuclear weapons.

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Iranian bank will need pre-
approval.

For Mark Dubowitz, the exec-
tutive director of the Washing-
ton-based Foundation for
Democracy in the Middle East,
there is a race against the
Iranian nuclear weapons clock.

“Iranian nuclear physics is
beaten by economic pressure,
which Iran advances its nuclear
weapons capacity, while using
its foreign exchange reserves
and stealing oil earnings to
head off economic collapse,”
Dubowitz told the Post on Sat-
day via email. “Europe
remains key if the West has any
chance of ensuring that the eco-
nomic cripple date occurs
before the nuclear threshold
date.”

“The billions of euros in EU
exports, particularly the sophisti-
cated machinery, industrial
equipment and technology that
Iran needs to run its economy,
must be significantly and rapidly
reduced,” he said.

Dubowitz, a leading expert
on international sanctions and
Iran’s economy, added, “If the last
EU measures force an import
emergency, the payments crisis
that brings Iran’s economy to
the brink of collapse, we may
soon have our answer to the
question of whether severe eco-
nomic pressure can break the
regime’s nuclear will. If EU san-
cctions, however, are riddled
with loopholes in design and halt-
measures in implementation,
in Iran because of the curren-
cy meltdown were a product of
the ‘sanctions begun by the
Bush administration and
expanded by the Obama
administration.’”

Her column titled “The tough-
est sanctions” noted the global-
ization of the economic sanc-
tions seeking to influence a
change in Iran’s behavior. She
cited the example of the Dutch
maritime firm Maersk – the
world’s largest shipping contain-
er companies – in pulling the
plug on its cargo deliveries to
Iran’s southern port of Bushehr.

While deeming Maersk’s move
as “not a victory to cheer about
as Iranians will suffer,” she
raised the question of “whether
the Iranian regime will respond
by agreeing to stop enriching
uranium.”

However, a growing body of
testimonials suggest that ordi-
nary Iranians understand that
regime is to blame for sanctions.

While writing a series of com-
mentaries in The New York Times
on his visit to Iran this year,
columnist Nicholas Kristof cited
an unemployed salesman as
saying, “We blame our regime,
not Western countries.”

Iranian President Mahmoud
Ahmadinejad acknowledged
that the “currency fluctuations
were caused by ‘psychological
pressure’ from outside.

In short, the sanctions are dis-
rupting the regime’s manage-
ment of the economy, sending
Iran’s market into a dizzy, and
possibly laying the foundation
for a second act by the Iranian
Green Movement. All of this
suggests that the only cure for
remedying the Iranian nuclear
regime crisis is jump-starting the
strug-
gling democracy movement
is even more powerful
sanctions.

The writer is a European affairs
correspondent for The Jerusalem
Post and a research fellow at the
Foundation for Defense of Demo-
cracies.