



Ahmadinejad vows no Iran concessions in nuclear crisis



Jul 23 06:52 AM US/Eastern

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday vowed that Iran would not yield in the crisis over its nuclear drive as world powers awaited a response from Tehran to a proposal aiming to end the standoff.

"The Iranian people are steadfast and will not step back an inch against the oppressive powers," Ahmadinejad told a rally in the southwestern province of Kohgeluyeh-Boyerahmad.

His defiant comments come after world powers warned Iran has only a fortnight to respond to their latest offer seeking to end a five-year crisis that has raised fears of regional conflict and sent oil prices spiralling.

World powers have offered to start pre-negotiations during which Tehran would add no more uranium-enriching centrifuges and in return face no further sanctions -- the so-called "freeze-for-freeze" approach.

Iran is already under three sets of UN Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt sensitive uranium enrichment work, which the West fears could be aimed at making nuclear weapons.

The United States took the unprecedented step of sending a top diplomat to meet Iran's chief negotiator Saeed Jalili at Saturday's international talks in Geneva which ended in a stalemate.

But Washington, which has led the efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear drive, has also warned Tehran of "punitive measures" if it spurns the international offer and presses on with enrichment work.

Ahmadinejad welcomed the US presence in talks as a "positive step" and said that the US diplomat William Burns had talked "politely in the meeting and respected the Iranian nation."

But the president vowed that further sanctions would not force Iran to back down in the standoff.

"The Iranian nation does not value your threats. You are mistaken if you think you can force this nation to back down with sanctions, threats and pressure," he said.

Ahmadinejad advised US officials "not to ruin your positive step with irrelevant comments and a colonialist language" in the speech broadcast on state television.

Iran denies allegations of seeking nuclear weapons, insisting that its programme is designed to provide energy for its growing population when the OPEC member's reserves of fossil fuels run out.

Permanent Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany have made Iran an offer, which includes trade incentives and

help with a civilian nuclear programme in return for suspending enrichment.

Ahmadinejad alleged that world powers "do not mind centrifuges and enrichment... but that they want show the world they can force the Iranians to retreat with a psychological operation and deception."

The New York Times on Tuesday released what it said was a two-page informal document that outlined Tehran's approach to talks in Geneva and was distributed by Iranian negotiators.

The paper called for seven more rounds of talks, stressed the need for an end to sanctions, and made no mention of an incentives package.

Iranian officials have repeatedly said they have no intention of freezing enrichment and that as a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has the right to make its own nuclear fuel.

However, Iran's first Russian-built nuclear power plant is yet to be completed and come online.

Hopes of a breakthrough rose in recent weeks after Ali Akbar Velayati, the top foreign policy advisor to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said it would be in Iran's interests to accept the package.

Ahmadinejad, who has already dismissed Velayati's comments as personal, reaffirmed that he was in charge of Iran's nuclear case.

"They (world powers) thought the nation was divided, that the people and the president had been sidelined in the nuclear case and that they would be able to impose their views.

"But I told them they were mistaken to celebrate and their feast would soon turn into a funeral."

Copyright AFP 2008, AFP stories and photos shall not be published, broadcast, rewritten for broadcast or publication or redistributed directly or indirectly in any medium