Iran's First Nuclear Plant to go Online in August

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's top nuclear official said Thursday that Iran's first nuclear plant is on schedule and will be put into operation this summer, while the country's foreign minister urged Tehran to cooperate with international nuclear authorities to avoid possible sanctions.

The Russia-built plant in Bushehr has been a key issue of contention between Iran and the international community. Iran and Russia say the plant is intended only for electricity generation, but critics say it has been a part of alleged Iranian efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

"We expect the nuclear power plant will be launched by August if everything goes according to plan," said Sergei Kiriyenko, chief of Rosatom, the state-run nuclear corporation.

"The resolution on Iran being drawn up will not affect these plans," he added.

The United Nations Security Council is exploring sanctions against Iran for its refusal to halt uranium enrichment. Russia and China were responsible for watering down the language of previous anti-Iran sanctions but have appeared to swing behind the U.S., Britain and France recently.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov urged the Iranians to avoid sanctions by working together with the International Atomic Energy Agency on an agreement, sponsored by Turkey and Brazil, that would ease fears Iran is secretly developing nuclear weapons.

"We want Tehran to formalize the contents of its agreement — how it is going to be implemented concretely — to the IAEA as soon as possible," Lavrov said in Rome.

Turkey and Brazil brokered the deal on Monday in a last-ditch effort to stave off sanctions. It calls for Iran to ship low-enriched uranium to Turkey, where it would be stored. In exchange, Iran would receive, within one year, higher-enriched fuel rods to be used in a U.S.-built medical research reactor. Research reactors use uranium enriched to a lower level than needed for nuclear weapons.

Moscow said it would support sanctions even though it has been the key driver behind Iran's civilian nuclear energy program.

Work on the Bushehr plant began over 35 years ago by a German company that eventually abandoned it after the Islamic revolution in 1979. Russia agreed to complete the project in the 1990s but has delayed the launching due to numerous problems, including disagreements over payment and where to store used fuel.

Russia delivered fuel for the plant, which will have 1,000 megawatts of output, more than two years ago.

Russian nuclear officials have said they will establish a joint venture with Iran to jointly operate the Bushehr reactor for at least the first year.

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