Iran Starts Nuclear Reactor, Tests Defenses

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BUSHEHR, Iran (AP) — Trucks rumbled into Iran's first reactor Saturday to begin loading tons of uranium fuel in a long-delayed startup touted by officials as both a symbol of the country's peaceful intentions to produce nuclear energy as well as a triumph over Western pressure to rein in its nuclear ambitions.

The Russian-built Bushehr nuclear power plant will be internationally supervised, including a pledge by Russia to safeguard it against materials being diverted for any possible use in creating nuclear weapons. Iran's agreement to allow the oversight was a rare compromise by the Islamic state over its atomic program.

Western powers have cautiously accepted the deal as a way to keep spent nuclear fuel from crossing over to any military use. They say it illustrates their primary struggle: to block Iran's drive to create material that could be used for nuclear weapons and not its pursuit of peaceful nuclear power.

Iran has long declared it has a right like other nations to produce nuclear energy. The country's nuclear chief described the startup as a "symbol of Iranian resistance and patience."

"Despite all pressure, sanctions and hardships imposed by Western nations, we are now witnessing the startup of the largest symbol of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities," Ali Akbar Salehi told reporters inside the plant with its cream-colored dome overlooking the Persian Gulf in southern Iran.

In several significant ways, the Bushehr plant stands apart from the showdowns over Iranian uranium enrichment, a process that can be used both to produce nuclear energy or nuclear weapons. It also could offer a possible test run for proposals to ease the impasse.

The Russian agreement to control the supply of nuclear fuel at Bushehr eased opposition by Washington and allies. Bushehr's operations are not covered by U.N. sanctions imposed after Iran refused to stop uranium enrichment. And last week, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said the Russian oversight at Bushehr is the "very model" offered Tehran under a U.N.-drafted plan unveiled last year.

That proposal — so far snubbed by Iran — called for Iran to halt uranium enrichment and get its supplies of reactor-ready material from abroad.

Western leaders fear Iran's enrichment labs could one day churn out weapons-grade material. Iran claims it has no interest in nuclear arms, but refuses to give up the right to make its own fuel.

Iran has some of the world's biggest oil reserves, but lacks refinery capacity to meet

domestic demand and must repurchase fuel on international markets. Nuclear power is seen as both a goal to meet power needs and an important technological achievement for the Islamic government.

The French Foreign Ministry said the Russian deal shows Iran does not need to enrich uranium to benefit from civilian nuclear power.

"This clearly shows that the sanctions do not aim to deprive Iran of its right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful uses," said the French statement.

In London, a Foreign Office junior minister, Alistair Burt, said the loading of Russian fuel at Bushehr "demonstrates that Iran can have the benefits of nuclear power."

But conservative Iranian lawmaker Arsalan Faithipour struck a tone of defiance.

"The startup at Bushehr proved the ineffectiveness of sanctions," he said.

After years of delays in completing the plant, Moscow now claims that the project is essential to persuading Iran to cooperate with international efforts to ensure it does not develop the bomb.

Iran has said that monitors from the U.N. nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, will have access to the fuel shipments at Bushehr, about 745 miles (1,200 kilometers) south of Tehran. Spent fuel contains plutonium, which can be used to make atomic weapons.

U.N. nuclear inspectors were on hand Saturday as the first truckloads of fuel were taken from a storage site to a "pool" inside the reactor. Over the next two weeks, 163 fuel assemblies — equal to 80 tons of uranium fuel — will be moved inside the building and then into the reactor core.

It will be another two months before the 1,000-megawatt light-water reactor — heavily guarded by soldiers and anti-aircraft batteries — is pumping electricity to Iranian cities.

Two weeks ago, two Iranian drones were sent over Bushehr to test of air defense capability. The drones were picked up, but were grounded before forces guarding the nuclear plant could open fire, Bushehr Provincial Gov. Mohammad Hossein Jahanbakhsh told The Associated Press.

"The decision had been to test the capability of the Bushehr air defense system. The reaction was appropriate and authorities were happy," he said.

The uranium fuel Russia has supplied for Bushehr is well below the more than 90 percent enrichment needed for a nuclear warhead. Iran is already producing its own uranium enriched to the Bushehr level — about 3.5 percent. It also has started a pilot program of enriching uranium to 20 percent, which officials say is needed for a medical research reactor.

Salehi said Iran will continue to enrich uranium to 20 percent, but had no intention to continuing the higher level of enrichment forever.

Iran raised more alarm in the West with its recent declaration of plans to build 10 new uranium enrichment sites inside protected mountain strongholds. It said it will begin construction on the first one in March in defiance of the U.N. sanctions.

"Today is a historic day and will be remembered in history," Salehi said at a news conference alongside the head of Russia's state-run nuclear corporation, Sergei Kiriyenko.

"The countdown to the Bushehr nuclear power plant has started," Kiriyenko said. "Congratulations."

Russia signed a $1 billion contract to build the Bushehr plant in 1995 but has dragged its feet on completing the work. Moscow had cited technical reasons for the delays, but analysts say Russia used the project to try to press Iran to ease its defiance over uranium enrichment.

Iran has announced plans to build other reactors and says designs for a second rector in southwestern Iran are taking shape.

Associated Press writers Jennifer Quinn in London, Angela Doland in Paris and Brian Murphy in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, contributed to this report.

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