Ahmadinejad Says Iran Can Do without Oil Sales

NASSER KARIMI, Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran can manage its economy even without crude exports, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed on Tuesday as Tehran cut off oil sales to Greece, the third European nation to be hit by an Iranian retaliatory measure ahead of EU's oil embargo.

Iran had warned in February that it may extend an earlier embargo imposed on Britain and France to other European countries, after the EU set a ban on Iranian oil over the country's controversial nuclear program. The EU ban is to go into effect in July.

The West suspects Iran is pursuing atomic weapons, a charge Tehran denies.

EU sanctions along with other punitive measures imposed by the United States are part of Western efforts to derail Iran's disputed nuclear program, which the West fears is aimed at developing atomic weapons. Iran insists its program is only for peaceful purposes.

Oil Minister Rostam Ghasemi announced the halt in sales to Greece on Tuesday, saying that "for the time being, Iran is not selling oil to Greece. "

He said the two countries had not reached an agreement for the resumption of crude exports. Earlier in April, Iran said it had stopped selling oil to 2 Greek oil companies because they failed to pay their bills.

Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad lambasted international measures against Iran.

"They — the West — intend to impose an embargo on our oil," he said during a visit to southern province of Hormozgan.

"We have as much hard currency as we need and the country will manage well, even if we don't sell a single barrel of oil for two or three years," he insisted. The speech was carried live on state TV.

Iran, the second largest producer in OPEC, exports some $80 billion oil per year. The amount matches some 80 percent of its foreign revenue and some 60 percent of its annual budget.

The 27-nation EU accounts for about 18 percent of Iran's oil exports. After the EU embargo was announced in January, Iranian officials have said Tehran would enact its own sanctions immediately, before European countries lined up alternative suppliers.

Apart from Britain and France, Iran counts Spain, the Netherlands, Greece,

Germany, Italy and Portugal among its European customers.

In Hormozgan, Ahmadinejad said that despite international pressure on his nation, Iran had increased revenue from non-oil exports to some $45 billion in 2011, from an average of $6.8 billion in the previous years.

The increase is seen as a result of a hike in the price of petrochemicals on international markets. Iran considers petrochemical products as separate from oil revenue.

On Saturday, Iran is to return to negotiations with five permanent U.N. Security Council nations plus Germany over its nuclear program. The talks are to be held in Istanbul.

In his speech, Ahmadinejad insisted on what he called Tehran's nuclear rights and warned that "whoever seeks to violate the rights of the Iranian nation will get a blow to the mouth."

The U.S. and its allies have sought to press Iran to suspend uranium enrichment in exchange for receiving reactor-ready fuel from abroad. Iran has pushed back by refusing to curtail enrichment, which is permitted under the U.N. treaty overseeing the spread of nuclear technology.

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