Iran Says Ready for Nuclear Flexibility

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TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran is ready to show flexibility at nuclear talks to ease Western concerns over its contentious nuclear program, its foreign ministry spokesman said on Saturday, as tensions rise in the standoff between the Islamic Republic, Israel and the West.

The remarks by Ramin Mehmanparast, published by the official IRNA news agency, underscore Tehran's push to resume talks with world powers as Western sanctions squeeze the economy tighter and the European Union weighs a boycott of Iranian natural gas.

"Iran is ready to show flexibility to remove concerns within a legal framework but such measures should be reciprocal," Mehmanparast was quoted as saying. "The other party needs to take measures to fully recognize Iran's nuclear rights and Iran's enrichment for peaceful purposes."

The five members of the U.N. Security Council, plus Germany and Iran, aim to resume high-level talks that were suspended in June. The countries want the Islamic Republic to stop enriching uranium to 20 percent purity because at that level the material can be quickly turned into fuel for nuclear weapons.

Iran has indicated it is ready to stop the higher enrichment if sanctions are lifted and its right to enrich is recognized. The U.S. and its allies accuse Iran of seeking to develop a nuclear weapon, a charge Tehran denies.

Earlier, the country's supreme leader said Iran would defeat its adversaries, who he said are using a combination of sanctions, military threats and clandestine operations in an attempt to make Tehran back down on its nuclear program.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's remarks follow a precipitous decline in the country's currency linked to economic sanctions imposed by the West, as well as remarks by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta highlighting the possibility of a cyberwar between Iran and the United States.

"We should not neglect the enemy. The enemy enters through various ways. One day it's talk of sanctions. Another day it's talk of military aggression. And one day, it's talk of soft war ... We have to be vigilant," state TV quoted Khamenei as saying during a speech in the northeast. "But they should rest assured that ... our enemies will fail in all their conspiracies and tricks."

Western powers are pursuing a two-pronged strategy that includes a mix of sanctions and diplomacy to try to force Tehran to halt uranium enrichment, a technology that can be used to produce nuclear fuel or materials for use in a warhead.

But the West has not ruled out the possibility of military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, and Panetta made a pointed warning on Thursday that Washington will strike back against a cyberattack, underscoring the Obama administration's growing concern that Iran could be the first country to unleash cyberterrorism on America.

Tehran for its part has announced the discovery of computer viruses at nuclear, industrial and government sites. It blames the West and Israel. Israel has said little to deflect suspicion that it tries to infect some Iranian systems.

Iranian leaders have been consistently defiant, announcing measures they say the Islamic Republic is taking to evade sanctions, defeat cyberattacks, and prepare to repulse or retaliate for a military strike.

"Many politicians ... in the U.S., Britain and other countries ... employed all their might and designs with the assumption they could bring the Islamic Republic and the Iranian nation to its knees. They are gone and even their names are forgotten but the Iranian nation is present by the grace of God," Khamenei said.

Iranian leaders have also argued that the country can always find customers for its oil and that the West is hurting itself, more than Iran, by cutting itself off from Iranian crude exports. Khamenei said Wednesday that European countries are "foolish" to support sanctions against Tehran, telling them they are sacrificing themselves for the sake of the United States.

But they also acknowledge that sanctions are taking a bite.

Iran's currency — already in steady decline for months — lost nearly 40 percent of its value earlier this month. It reached an all-time low of 35,500 to the dollar, down from 24,000 rials days earlier and close to 10,000 rials as recently as early 2011. It's now fluctuating between 29,000 rials to 32,000 rials in the open market. The decline set off limited, one-day protests in Tehran's market district.

The plummet of the rial was blamed on a combination of Iranian government mismanagement and the bite from tighter sanctions. Both measures have reduced the amount of foreign currency coming into the country.

Khamenei urged the nation to consume Iranian products and shun foreign goods to support domestic production.

"We should choose what we consume from among our own products. That some are always after foreign brands and names is wrong," he said. "Domestic consumption increases domestic production. When domestic production is increased, it will tackle unemployment and reduces inflation. These are all connected to each other."

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