Iran's President Visits Uranium-Rich Niger

DALATOU MAMANE, Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the uranium-rich West African nation of Niger on Tuesday, although officials discounted that the mineral was the reason for his visit.

Niger's Foreign Affairs Minister Mohamed Bazoum downplayed international speculation that Iran had come in search of uranium, saying: "I don't think that's the goal of this visit."

Niger obeys international regulations on selling uranium, said Bazoum, who added that it would not be legal to provide uranium to Iran.

The Iranian leader arrived Monday in Niger's capital, where he was greeted by President Mahamadou Issoufou.

The two-day stop in Niger is the second on Ahmadinejad's trip to West Africa. He already has visited Benin and is due to visit Ghana before returning home.

The West has imposed several rounds of punishing sanctions on Iran, which Iran says has crippled its economy.

Western powers are hoping to force Iran to scale back its uranium enrichment program, suspecting it might aim to produce nuclear weapons.

Iran has refused, insisting its program is for peaceful purposes, and says it has a right to enrich under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Ahmadinejad has said that the country does not need to buy uranium in Africa, according to the semi-official ISNA news agency.

Last week, Iran announced two nuclear-related projects to expand capabilities to extract and process uranium

Iran already has uranium mines and the ability to turn the raw ore into a material called yellowcake, which is the first step in the enrichment chain.

But the new facilities — expansion in the country's largest uranium mine and processing facility — give Tehran greater access and control in making the raw materials for enrichment to nuclear fuel and, potentially, for warhead-grade material.

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