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At Europeans' Talks With Tehran About Its Nuclear Future, a Familiar Impasse Endures

By HELENE COOPER and ELAINE SCIOLINO

PARIS, July 12 — Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice suggested today that she will encourage foreign ministers from Europe, Russia and China to seek action from the United Nations Security Council in the face of Iran's reluctance to respond to an international proposal aimed at resolving a crisis over its nuclear program.

Ms. Rice's remarks as she arrived here a day after Iranian negotiators failed to give a definitive answer yesterday to a package of incentives meant to coax it into abandoning its nuclear ambitions. Last month, the foreign ministers from the world's eight richest nations had called for a formal response before a meeting of international diplomats today.

Ms. Rice said Iran's response "has been disappointing and incomplete."

"Apparently, and I just want to say apparently, they have decided that they want to move ahead with a program that is unacceptable to the international community," Ms. Rice told reporters on her plane. "That then means that we would be on the path to the Security Council."

Five weeks after the world's major powers offered Iran economic and political rewards if it agreed to freeze important nuclear activities, Iran has neither accepted nor rejected the offer, nor even set a date for when it would respond. And it has argued that the United States and its allies have set unrealistic preconditions for talks.

Indeed, when the two sides met in Brussels on Tuesday, they simply talked past each other, again dashing expectations that the incentives proposal would reinvigorate negotiations. Instead, the talks have stalled, ensuring that nothing will be accomplished before the summit meeting of industrial countries that opens this weekend in St. Petersburg, Russia.

"We're still talking about the framework for talks, not at all about the substance," one European official said.

In effect, Iran has begun negotiating on its own terms, rejecting the six countries' condition that Tehran freeze all uranium-enrichment activities before substantive talks can begin, and daring them to do something about it.

"We should have more time — be patient and try to negotiate," Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, told reporters after three hours of meetings with Javier Solana, the European Union foreign policy chief, and senior European negotiators.

He repeated Iran's oft-stated position that there are "various ambiguities in the package," but declined to say what they were because the incentives package has never formally been made public.

He also refused to be pinned down about a deadline for a formal response.

He said Iran would have to wait until various committees studying the proposal had time to finish their work, adding that Iran had the legal right under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to continue enriching uranium.

In addition to refusing to cease enrichment, Iranian officials are skeptical that the West will deliver on whatever incentives are agreed upon, particularly light-water nuclear reactors.

And there appear to be divisions among the Iranians on how hard a line to pursue in negotiations.

That the two sides failed to bridge the gaps was painfully obvious in the terse public statements by Mr. Larijani and Mr. Solana. They did not characterize the talks as positive. There was no warmth between them. They took no questions. They did pledge to stay in contact.

European officials were furious, saying their governments had been lured into talking to Iran while that country was still enriching uranium and while action at the United Nations Security Council was on hold.

More than once during Tuesday's talks, Mr. Larijani tried to draw the other side into making a commitment to negotiate without Iran first suspending enrichment, a stance that Mr. Solana made clear was impossible, European officials said.

"We're disappointed," said one of the officials. "They didn't seek to clarify elements of the proposal - beyond questioning our sincerity, that is."

In the meetings, Mr. Larijani asked for unambiguous assurances that the world powers were "sincere," noting that talk about regime change in Iran created an atmosphere of distrust, the official said.

The problem, one European official said, is that the Iranian side laid out no coherent negotiating position, only generalities, and is therefore, "difficult to understand."

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity under normal diplomatic rules.

Mr. Larijani also asked for unambiguous assurances that the world powers were "sincere," noting that talk about regime change in Iran created an atmosphere of distrust, a European official said.

Tuesday's talks included representatives from Russia, France, Germany and Britain for the first time since Mr. Solana presented the offer in Tehran on June 6.

The United States was not at the table because it had agreed to meet with Iran only after Iran froze its uranium enrichment and formal negotiations began. China, the sixth country involved, did not send a representative.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the foreign ministers of France, Britain, Germany, Russia and China will meet on Wednesday in Paris with Mr. Solana to discuss the next steps, including whether to take Iran's case to the Security Council once again for possible punishment. Given the resistance by Russia and China to punitive action, deciding on a unified plan of action may prove difficult.

To some American and European officials, the Iranians' refusal to take a stand is nothing more than stalling while they continue to produce enriched uranium, which can be used to generate energy or fuel bombs.

Iranian officials say otherwise, demanding first that there be no preconditions - specifically a freeze on its enrichment activities - in advance of formal negotiations. These officials have also said the incentives package came only after Tehran succeeded in running a 164-centrifuge cascade to enrich uranium. To give up their only bargaining chip would be foolish, they say.

A second demand from Tehran is that it be given guarantees that the incentives will be delivered. Iranian officials have said they have no confidence that the Bush administration will provide sophisticated technology, particularly if there is opposition from Congress.

Another reason for the delay is apparently a lack of consensus inside Iran.

Mr. Larijani, who is also secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, reports directly to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader and the country's most powerful official.

Mr. Larijani does not have full authority over the Iranian nuclear dossier, and operates in an environment of fluid power politics. Some senior clerics and political figures have called for an outright rejection of the proposal.

His predecessor was fired last year for appearing too soft in failed talks with Europe over a less generous incentives package.

At times in Tuesday's talks, Mr. Larijani said he could not answer the questions posed, one European official said.

Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, which is responsible for running Iran's nuclear facilities and keeping its scientists working, has consistently taken a harder line on curbing enrichment.

For his part, Ayatollah Khamenei has made clear in high-level meetings that he does not trust the world powers to make good on their promises, according to Iranian officials familiar with the meetings.

He is particularly distrustful of the United States, which he believes is using the talks as a pretext to eventually harm Iran, but has told his nuclear team that in the interest of "consensus," he would allow them to continue to negotiate, the officials said.

It is unclear how much influence President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wields in this. Some Iranian officials have said in private that he is an important, if extreme, voice who enjoys the support of the masses but needs to be educated on the language of diplomacy.

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