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Bush Says Iran Still Has Time to Respond to Offer

By CHRISTINE HAUSER

President Bush said today that the time has passed for Iran to respond to a package of incentives to stop uranium enrichment, but that there could still be opportunities for negotiations even though the case is now being referred to the United Nations Security Council.

“Their deadline passed,” said Mr. Bush during a news conference in Germany, where he met Chancellor Angela Merkel. “That’s why we’re going to the U.N. Security Council.”

He added later about the Iranians: “They can show up any time and say, ‘Wait a minute, now we’d like to go back and negotiate.’ We’re not precluding any further negotiations with the Iranians.”

Mr. Bush and other leaders of the Group of 8 industrial countries are meeting this weekend in a summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, and efforts to resolve the standoff over Iran’s nuclear enrichment program could be raised in some of their talks.

On Wednesday, Russia and China crossed a diplomatic threshold in the effort to curb Tehran’s nuclear ambitions, joining the United States and Europe by agreeing to seek a United Nations Security Council resolution ordering Iran to freeze some nuclear activities or face sanctions.

The agreement among the foreign ministers representing Germany and the five permanent members of the Security Council came after more than a month in which Iran was expected to respond to their offer of economic and energy incentives if it suspended its uranium enrichment.

The group agreed to seek a Security Council resolution that would make suspension of enrichment mandatory. “Should Iran refuse to comply,” the group said in a statement, “then we will work for the adoption of measures” under an article of the United Nations Charter that allows for nonmilitary punitive sanctions.

It is not certain whether the unity of the six countries will hold.

Mr. Bush added today that he would work with the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin and would encourage him to join the group in insisting to the Iranians that they should not have a nuclear weapons program. Russia has been concerned about any measures that could lead to an impasse or eventual military action against Iran.

Iranian officials have insisted that their uranium enrichment program is intended for civilian use and have said that Iran will respond in August after clearing up ambiguities in the proposal.

But Mr. Bush said today that weeks, not months, were a reasonable period of time for Iran to respond.

“In order for us to come to the table, however, what they must do is verifiably show that they’re not enriching,” Mr. Bush said.

Today, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran said his country would not give up its right to nuclear uranium enrichment under a program that it has described as intended for energy use.

In a defiant statement carried on Iranian news agencies, Mr. Ahmadinejad said that the proposal deserves proper study and Iran would do its best to reply to it by Aug. 22.

“If the Iranian nation and government come to the conclusion that Western countries do not have the goodwill, they will change their policy regarding the package of incentives,” the Iranian president said, according to the IRNA news agency.

“Nobody should expect that tense relations which have existed for several years can be settled in a very short period of time,” he said.

Mr. Ahmadinejad also appeared to dismiss the impact on his country of any potential censure or sanctions, saying that such moves would hurt the Europeans, which have ties with Iran.

He said that Iran has complied with the terms of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

“But if the Iranian nation comes to realize that the Europeans are not pursuing good intentions, then I warn them here and now that the Iranian nation will revise its policies,” he said according to the FARS news agency.

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