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Iran Says Answer on Atom Deal Will Take More Than a Month

By NAZILA FATHI

TEHRAN, June 21 — President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Wednesday that Iran would take more than a month to give a formal response to an international proposal to resolve the dispute over its uranium enrichment program.

President Bush responded that it seemed "like an awful long time" to wait for an answer.

The proposal offers Iran a package of incentives in exchange for freezing its nuclear activities. When it was put forth early this month by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany, Western diplomats said Iran would have only weeks to respond.

That position appeared to remain intact on Wednesday. A senior Bush administration official said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who was in Vienna with Mr. Bush meeting with allies, had telephoned her European counterparts, including Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov of Russia, to discuss Mr. Ahmadinejad's comments.

"They agreed to stick to the current timeline," the administration official said. "That timeline is still the end of the month."

The official, who asked that his name not be used because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the issue, said that if Iran did not respond within the allotted time, the expectation was that the countries involved would "start moving down the other pathway," of seeking United Nations sanctions.

Mr. Ahmadinejad has previously said he regards the international proposal as a "step forward," but has insisted that Iran has the right to enrich uranium for civilian uses.

"We want equal and fair negotiations with no precondition," the Iranian Students News Agency quoted him as saying. He said Iran would announce its response to the proposal toward the end of August.

"Iranian people stand firmly to defend their rights and will not give in to pressure even an iota," he said later, according to the agency.

At a news conference in Vienna, Mr. Bush expressed some impatience over Mr. Ahmadinejad's remarks. "It shouldn't take the Iranians that long to analyze what is a reasonable deal," he said.

On Monday, President Bush warned Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment program or face the consequences. He said the United States remained willing to join multinational talks with Iran, but only if Iran immediately suspended the enrichment program.

If Iran rejects that offer, he said, "it will result in action before the Security Council, further isolation from the world and progressively stronger political and economic sanctions."

On Wednesday, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hamidreza Assefi, similarly brushed off the idea of a deadline and said Mr. Bush's language was unacceptable.

"Europe, in a correct move and with understanding of Iran's mentality, has not set any deadline in its proposal," he said during a news conference. "Even if there was a deadline in the proposal, the Islamic Republic would not have accepted it."

Iran has not hinted at what its response to the proposal will be, and senior officials have been ambiguous while discussions continue. But a senior official, who spoke only on condition of anonymity, said it was unlikely that Iran would accept returning to full suspension of its uranium enrichment activities, with United Nations nuclear agency seals on the centrifuges it uses for the process.

"We already have the capability to enrich uranium," the official said, "and we can hide a small pilot program anywhere underground if they put too much pressure on us."

Iran has said it favors negotiations and wants to seek a peaceful solution to the standoff. But analysts predict that Iran will offer a counterproposal and try to buy more time.

"It seems that Iran will not come out and say that it accepts the proposal anytime soon and will try to kill more time," said Issa Saharkhiz, an Iranian political analyst and reformist politician.

"The nuclear program has created solidarity and unity inside the country," he said. "By sticking to its policy the government thinks it can force the West to offer a better deal and it can appear like the winner inside the country."

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