

Iran Threatens U.S. With 'Harm and Pain'; White House Says Comments Further Isolate Tehran

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By GEORGE JAHN, Associated Press Writer

VIENNA, Austria -- Iran threatened the United States with "harm and pain" Wednesday for its role in hauling Tehran before the U.N. Security Council over its nuclear program.

But the United States and its European allies said Iran's nuclear intransigence left the world no choice but to seek Security Council action. The council could impose economic and political sanctions on Iran.

The statements were delivered to the 35-member board of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which is meeting to focus on Tehran's refusal to freeze uranium enrichment.

The White House dismissed the rhetoric out of Tehran.

"I think that provocative statements and actions only further isolate Iran from the rest of the world," White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters traveling with President Bush to hurricane-affected states in the Gulf Coast. "And the international community has spelled out to Iran what it needs to do."

John Bolton, America's ambassador to the United Nations, said Iran's comments showed how much of a menace it was.

"Their threats show why leaving a country like that with a nuclear weapon is so dangerous," he told The Associated Press in a phone call from Washington.

Bolton classified the Iranian comments as "reflecting their determination to acquire weapons."

Wednesday's meeting is in effect the last step before the Security Council begins considering Iran's nuclear activities and international fears they could be misused to make weapons. It began with both Iran and the nations opposing its enrichment plans sticking to their positions.

"The United States has the power to cause harm and pain," said Ali Asghar Soltanieh, a senior Iranian delegate to the IAEA. "But the United States is also susceptible to harm and pain. So if that is the path that the U.S. wishes to choose, let the ball roll."

He did not elaborate but suggested Iran was awaiting additional American moves.

But diplomats accredited to the meeting and in contact with the Iranians said the statement could be a veiled threat to use oil as an economic weapon.

Iran is the second-largest producer within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and a boycott could target Europe, China or India.

At an OPEC meeting in Vienna, Iran petroleum minister Sayed Kazem Vaziri Hamaneh deflected questions about Iran's threat, saying: "Ask the one who said that."

He later sought to ease worries about Iran's oil plans, telling reporters: "So far there's no reason to reduce exports. Iran has no intention whatsoever of reducing its oil exports."

Oil supplies are tight worldwide and prices already are high. Although the United States does not buy oil directly from Iran, any Iranian effort to tighten world supplies would effect oil prices in the United States.

Iran also has leverage with extremists in Iraq, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and the Islamic militant group Hamas, which won Palestinian elections in January. Both groups are classified by the U.S. State Department as terrorist organizations.

On Tuesday, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld accused Iran of dispatching elements of its Revolutionary Guard to stir trouble inside Iraq.

Iran's statement was unusually harsh, reflecting Tehran's frustration at failing to deflect the threat of Security Council action against it in the coming weeks. Tehran maintains its nuclear program is for generating electricity.

"Our nation has made its decision to fully use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and all have to give in to this decision made by the Iranian nation," Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in Iran. "We have made our choice."

Iran also attacked "warmongers in Washington" for what it said was an unjust accusation that Tehran's nuclear intentions were mainly for military use. It also suggested America was vulnerable, despite its strength.

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