

Iran Softens Tone, but Talks With Europeans on Nuclear Program End in Bitterness

By [ELAINE SCIOLINO](#)

March 4, 2006

New York Times

VIENNA, March 3 — If diplomacy were a courtship, the rendezvous between [Iran](#) and Europe in a Viennese mansion on Friday could be called a failed seduction.

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, had asked for urgent talks with his former European negotiating partners, promising new ideas aimed at both restarting the negotiations and keeping Iran's nuclear case out of the [United Nations](#) Security Council.

But in nearly two hours of early morning talks, the Iranians rejected the Europeans' key demand for resuming the relationship: a return to an indefinite freeze on making enriched uranium, which can be used either to produce electricity or to make bombs.

The Europeans made their disappointment clear. "We were unable to reach agreement," Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany announced tersely to reporters. Mr. Steinmeier, the host of the meeting at his ambassador's residence, offered Iran a stark ultimatum: either stop enriching uranium and "return to the table of negotiations," or face judgment before the Security Council.

[Javier Solana](#), the [European Union's](#) foreign policy chief, who had canceled a trip to Kiev, Ukraine, to attend, was just as blunt, calling the failure to reach agreement "unfortunate."

So were the other two European officials, the French foreign minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, and John Sawers, the political director of the British foreign office, who had taken the place of the foreign secretary, [Jack Straw](#), who was ill.

The Iranians, according to participants in the talks, were visibly rattled. Mr. Larijani had come in with a new conciliatory tone. Gone was the combative talk about Iran's sovereign right to enrich uranium as a signer of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Rather, Mr. Larijani expressed sympathy for the European approach and support for the need to build confidence on all sides, so talks could continue under a November 2004 agreement with France, Germany and Britain. That agreement froze Iran's enrichment-related activities in exchange for potential political and economic rewards.

To that end, he said that Iran would be willing to implement a two-year moratorium on industrial-scale uranium enrichment and recommit itself to a more thorough inspection of its facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

However, continuation of the small-scale uranium enrichment operation that Iran restarted last month at its vast Natanz facility, and which Iran says is for research purposes, was nonnegotiable.

The Europeans, who spoke on condition of anonymity under diplomatic rules, said they were not surprised. But they responded with a quiet ferocity that has been unusual in their dealings with Iran.

Mr. Steinmeier rejected Mr. Larijani's request that the two sides announce publicly that "progress" had been made. He also brushed off Mr. Larijani's objection to public statements by the Europeans that no agreement had been reached.

The German foreign minister even said that since there was no progress to report, it made no sense for Mr. Larijani to join in the brief encounter with the news media on the steps of the ambassador's residence.

In an apparent protest, the Iranian delegation, which had pitched its flag next to those of Britain, France, Germany and the European Union, carried it away before the Europeans made their statements.

The dispute moves next to the session of the 35-country board of the International Atomic Energy Agency that will open in Vienna on Monday. In early February, the board overwhelmingly voted to report Iran's case to the Security Council, a move that reflected increasing suspicion that Iran was determined to develop nuclear weapons. The resolution allows Security Council action against Iran after a delay of at least a month.

It is not yet certain whether the board will try to pass another resolution next week, or whether one would be needed before the Security Council acts.

While the Europeans, together with the United States and a number of other countries, seem to be eager to have the Security Council take up the Iran issue, Russia is extremely reluctant.

Like the Europeans, the Russians had demanded that Iran stop uranium enrichment at Natanz. When Mr. Larijani was in Russia on Thursday, the Russians rejected the same offer he later presented to the Europeans, participants in Friday's meeting said.

But Russia does not support sending the matter to the Security Council, for fear that it would set off an irrevocable march toward punitive measures.

Russia's foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, said Friday there was still time before the nuclear agency's board meeting to reach an agreement, one that would keep the agency at the center of efforts to resolve the confrontation.

"If the issues are sent to the Security Council, we are concerned that this would lead to escalation of the situation," Mr. Lavrov said, speaking in English, in an interview with American news organizations in Moscow. "I know how the Security Council works: you start with a soft

reminder, then you call upon, then you require, then you demand, then you threaten. It will become a self-propelling function."

The Russians are negotiating with Iran on a possible face-saving joint venture, in which Russia would enrich Iran's uranium on Russian soil, under Russian control.

That procedure would allow Iran to continue to operate its Isfahan plant, which converts raw uranium into a form that is ready to be enriched, but not to master enrichment technology.

Contradicting Mr. Steinmeier, who said in Vienna that "time is running out," Mr. Lavrov said there was still time to resolve the crisis. But he acknowledged that he had no clear idea of how to proceed if Iran insisted on defying the agency's demands.

"I am very frank with you," he said. "I don't have an answer. I don't think anybody else has an answer."

Steven Lee Myers contributed reporting from Moscow for this article.