

Iran misses informal nuclear offer deadline

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BRUSSELS -- Iran has missed an informal Saturday deadline to respond to an offer by major powers on its nuclear programme, a European Union official said, but European diplomats are ready to wait a few more days for an answer.

Major powers asked Iran on July 19 to respond within two weeks to their offer to hold off from imposing more U.N. sanctions if Tehran froze expansion of its nuclear work. Iran has dismissed the idea of having a deadline to reply.

"There is nothing new (from Iran)," one EU official said on Saturday, adding that the bloc did not really expect an answer over the weekend.

"One should not focus on the deadline too much ... what matters is that we get a clear answer quickly, it's not a matter of one day," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the nuclear talks.

The West accuses Iran of seeking to build nuclear warheads under cover of a civilian power programme. Iran, the world's fourth largest oil producer, denies the charge.

The United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany in June offered Iran economic and other incentives to halt uranium enrichment, which can have both civilian and military uses.

(Reporting by Ingrid Melander; Editing by Giles Elgood)

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Iran rejects deadline over nuclear proposal

Iran has brushed aside a deadline to respond to an international offer that had aimed to defuse the confrontation over its nuclear programme.

By Angus McDowall

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President Ahmadinejad said the US was "in decline" Photo: REUTERS

The offer, to defer new economic sanctions in return for Iran suspending its uranium enrichment programme, was made two weeks ago when US and Iranian diplomats discussed the six-year nuclear crisis for the first time.

It had followed weeks of sabre rattling in which Israel rehearsed bomb attacks on Iran which in turn tested long range missiles that could strike Israel.

"We have not had any discussion or agreement of the so-called timeline," said Ali Asghar Soltaniyeh, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations nuclear watchdog.

But his brusque rejection of the deadline imposed by the US and the other countries, including Britain, which made the offer, is unlikely to deter international pressure.

"We want and we expect a response this weekend," a US State Department spokesman said. "They were given two weeks. The two weeks is up this weekend."

European diplomats have given Iran a little more leeway, but insist that it answer their proposals within a few days.

"One should not focus too much on Saturday," an EU official said. "If it's not Saturday but next week, we'll not make a big fuss about it. What matters is to get a clear answer quickly, in the very coming days."

However, despite Iran's prevarication, there are signs of increasing internal debate over whether it should, eventually, accept some sort of compromise.

While the president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched a new anti-Western diatribe on Friday, saying the US was "in decline", his powerful political opponents are pushing for more measured language.

Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a former president who retains influence in top policy circles, rejected the notion of a deadline but said Iran must keep talking.

"The plan now is to negotiate," he said at Friday prayers one week ago. "What are all ultimatums that you are issuing, that you have to take in two weeks? The plan is to talk. Iran is ready. It will come there and talk."

While Western countries accuse Iran of trying to build a nuclear bomb and hiding key parts of its plans, Iran has always said its programme is purely civilian and that it has not breached international rules.

Several years of negotiations have failed to stop Iran pursuing the process - nor have two-and-a-half years of sanctions and mounting US pressure.

If Iran continues to reject a suspension, Western countries still say they will negotiate while pushing for sanctions. But with Russia and China only reluctantly agreeing to tougher action against Iran, these could take months to be approved.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2488879/Iran-rejects-deadline-over-nuclear-proposal.html>