

Israel warns on Iran nuclear aims

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Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz has warned that Iran is near a breakthrough in its nuclear programme.

Mr Mofaz accused Iran of pursuing a strategy of buying time in talks aimed at limiting its nuclear ambitions.

The EU and the US have offered Tehran a series of incentives in a bid to halt its uranium enrichment. Iran has not yet responded to the offer.

Mr Mofaz, known for his hard-line stance on Iran, is a candidate to become Israel's next prime minister.

Current Israeli PM Ehud Olmert has announced he will step down in September.

Speaking on a visit to Washington, Mr Mofaz said it was "unacceptable" for Iran to become a nuclear power.

"Our estimation is that already by [2009] Iran will reach enrichment capability and as soon as 2010 will have option to reach [uranium production] at military levels," he said, according to the AFP news agency.

"It's a race against time and time is winning," the Israeli minister added.

Triple sanctions

Iran had been set a deadline of this weekend to respond to a proposal from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany to suspend uranium enrichment.

The Security Council has already imposed three sets of sanctions, and a fourth could follow if the current offer is rejected by Tehran.

But, says the BBC's Jon Leyne, setting Iran a deadline always threatened to be counter-productive, especially when there was no immediate penalty for not complying.

Iran has said it will offer its own ideas in its own time - perhaps in the next two weeks.

For their part, the European Union and the United States, who are co-operating on this initiative, have been giving mixed messages on how precisely and how seriously they view the deadline, our correspondent notes.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7538524.stm

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