

France warning of war with Iran

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French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner says the world should prepare for war over Iran's nuclear programme.

"We have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war," Mr Kouchner said in an interview on French TV and radio.

He was speaking ahead of a visit to Russia on Monday, during which Iran is likely to feature prominently.

Iran's nuclear programme will also be one of the main issues for the UN nuclear watchdog's annual conference, starting in Vienna on Monday.

Iran denies it is trying to acquire nuclear weapons, and says it only wants nuclear power to generate electricity for civilian purposes.

But it has repeatedly rejected UN demands to give up the enrichment of uranium, which the US and other Western states fear is being diverted to a nuclear weapons project.

Tougher approach

Mr Kouchner said negotiations with Iran should continue "right to the end", but that an Iranian nuclear weapon would pose "a real danger for the whole world".

He said a number of large French companies had been asked not to tender for business in Iran.

"We are not banning French companies from submitting. We have advised them not to. These are private companies."

"But I think that it has been heard and we are not the only ones to have done this."

Mr Kouchner will seek agreement with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov over tighter UN sanctions to try to force Iran to give up enrichment, the French foreign ministry says.

Russia has a UN Security Council veto over any new sanctions, and its support is seen as vital for any new approach. It also has perhaps the greatest leverage over Tehran, as the supplier of fuel for its nuclear reactor.

But Mr Kouchner said even in the absence of UN action, the European Union should prepare its own sanctions against Iran.

"We have decided while negotiations are continuing, to prepare eventual sanctions outside the ambit of UN sanctions. Our good friends, the Germans, suggested that," he said.

'Playing for time'

Iran has warned that any new punishments could push it to stop co-operating with the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The IAEA's members meet this week in Austria, with Iran likely to top the agenda.

The director of the organisation, Mohamed ElBaradei, has been criticised in the West over a new deal with Iran to clear up questions about its past nuclear activities.

The US and its allies believe the deal just gives Iran more time, during which they fear it will advance its nuclear programme.

Since becoming foreign minister earlier this year, Mr Kouchner has not shied away from controversy.

Last month he was quoted as saying the Iraqi government was "not functioning" and seemed to hint that Prime Minister Nouri Maliki should resign, provoking an angry reaction from Baghdad.

The BBC's diplomatic correspondent Jonathan Marcus says France has changed its approach to world affairs under its

new President Nicolas Sarkozy, adopting a harder line on several issues, and seeking to improve relations with the United States.

But it is the tougher rhetoric aimed at Tehran which will please Washington the most, he says.

Until now the UN Security Council has imposed economic sanctions on Iran, but did not allow for military action.

The United States has not ruled out a military attack against Iran to prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

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France says must prepare for possible war with Iran
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By Francois Murphy

PARIS (Reuters) - French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said on Sunday his country must prepare for the possibility of war against Iran over its nuclear program, but he did not believe any such action was imminent.

Seeking to ratchet up the pressure on Iran, Kouchner also told RTL radio and LCI television that the world's major powers should use further sanctions to show they were serious about stopping Tehran getting atom bombs, and said France had asked French firms not to bid for tenders in the Islamic Republic.

"We must prepare for the worst," Kouchner said in an interview, adding: "The worst, sir, is war."

Asked about the preparations, he said it was normal to prepare for various eventualities.

"We are preparing ourselves by trying to put together plans that are the chiefs of staff's prerogative (but) that is not about to happen tomorrow," he added.

Tehran insists it only wants to master nuclear technology to produce electricity, but it has yet to comply with repeated U.N. demands that it suspend uranium enrichment and other sensitive work that could potentially be used in producing weapons.

Kouchner's comments follow a similarly hawkish statement by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who said last month in his first major foreign policy speech since taking office that a diplomatic push by the world's powers was the only alternative to "an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran".

Asked if France was involved in any planning towards war, he said: "The French army is not at the moment associated with anything at all, nor with any maneuver at all."

"PEACE IS IN YOUR INTEREST"

France has said repeatedly it wants the U.N. Security Council to pass tougher sanctions against Iran over its failure to dispel fears that it is secretly pursuing nuclear weapons.

"We do not want to signal anything other than 'peace is in your interest, and in ours too,'" Kouchner said, adding that the door should be left open to negotiations with Tehran, but Paris has made a suspension of nuclear work a condition for talks.

The United States, Germany, France and Britain have led a diplomatic drive to punish Iran for refusing to halt its uranium enrichment program. They succeeded in persuading reluctant Russia and China to back two U.N. sanctions resolutions.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Tehran would not give up its nuclear program.

"Of course we will not abandon our right to nuclear technology," he told state television. "They (the West) talks about imposing sanctions on Iran, but they can not do it."

Washington says the time has to expand the penalties and has called a September 21 meeting of the six powers to

discuss a third sanctions resolution to submit to the U.N. Security Council.

Kouchner said France had asked its biggest companies, including oil giant Total and gas firm Gaz de France, not to bid for projects in Iran.

"We have already asked a certain number of our large companies to not respond to tenders, and it is a way of signaling that we are serious," Kouchner said.

"We are not banning French companies from submitting. We have advised them not to. These are private companies. But I think that it has been heard and we are not the only ones to have done this."

In addition, Paris and Berlin were preparing possible European Union economic sanctions against Tehran, Kouchner said.

"We have decided to ... prepare ourselves for possible sanctions outside the U.N. sanctions and which would be European sanctions. Our German friends proposed it. We discussed it a few days ago," Kouchner said.

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