

Iran refuses to stop nuclear enriching

BY GEORGE JAHN
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DAVOS, Switzerland — A confidential summary of talks between key European powers and Iran made available on Tuesday shows there has been no progress in getting Iran to scrap nuclear enrichment, even though Tehran acknowledged it does not need nuclear energy.

The United States and several other countries fear Iran is seeking to enrich uranium not to the low level needed to generate power but to weapons-grade uranium that forms the core of nuclear warheads.

Iran publicly insists it only seeks to make low-grade enriched uranium for nuclear fuel. But the summary of the last meeting on the issue involving representatives of France, Britain, Germany and Iran says Tehran acknowledged what Washington and its allies have argued all along — that the oil-rich country has no need for nuclear energy.

"Iran recognizes explicitly that its fuel cycle program cannot be justified on economic grounds," the document says.

Diplomats familiar with the talks said on condition of anonymity that the atmosphere between the two sides had improved during the second round held in Geneva on Jan. 17.

But they agreed that no progress was being made on the Europeans' insistence that Iran's present temporary suspension of its enrichment programs be turned into a commitment to permanently mothball all such activities.

"The two positions cannot coexist," said one of the diplomats, from a West

European nation. "If the impasse cannot be resolved, then there will be no solution," clearing the path for Iran to resume work on activities that will allow it to enrich uranium, he said.

Another diplomat agreed there was no progress on the core issue but expressed hope that common ground could be found in future rounds.

A separate confidential memorandum summarizing talks focusing on political and security themes said the atmosphere was "more conducive and productive" than the initial round held Dec. 21.

Iran suspended uranium enrichment and all related activities in November, derailing U.S. attempts to have it reported to the U.N. Security Council for alleged violations of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The International Atomic Energy Agency, in Vienna, Austria, is policing the freeze.

Reflecting its continued view that it has a right to resume enrichment programs in the near future, Iran recently said it would decide within three months whether to continue the suspension.

Concerns about Iran grew after revelations in mid-2002 of two secret nuclear facilities — a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy water production plant near Arak. That led to a subsequent IAEA investigation of what turned out to be nearly two decades of covert nuclear activities, including suspicious "dual use" experiments that can be linked to weapons programs.

President Bush has labeled Iran part of an "axis of evil" with North Korea and prewar Iraq.

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