

Iran has up to 6,000 uranium centrifuges: Ahmadinejad

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TEHRAN (AFP) — President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on Saturday that Iran has boosted the number of uranium-enriching centrifuges to up to 6,000, in an expansion of its nuclear drive that defies international calls for a freeze.

"Today they (the West) have agreed that the existing 5,000 to 6,000 centrifuges do not increase and that there is no problem if this number of centrifuges work," Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying by state radio.

Ahmadinejad said in April that Iran was working to install 6,000 more centrifuges at an underground hall in a plant at its nuclear facility in Natanz, where it already had 3,000 running.

It is a major expansion of Iran's nuclear programme, which the West fears could be aimed at making atomic weapons.

Iran is already under three sets of UN Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment, which makes nuclear fuel as well as the fissile core of an atomic bomb.

World powers, seeking to resolve the standoff, have offered to start pre-negotiations during which Tehran would add no more uranium-enriching centrifuges and in return face no further sanctions.

Iran was given a two-week deadline to give a final answer to world powers seeking a breakthrough in the crisis after talks a week ago in Geneva with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana ended in stalemate.

The United States, which took the unprecedented step of sending a top diplomat to meet Iran's chief negotiator at the Geneva talks, has warned Tehran of "punitive measures" if it spurns the offer and presses on with enrichment.

Ahmadinejad said the US presence in at the Geneva talks was a "success" for Iran regardless of its outcome, state radio reported.

"They said a few years ago that talks without a US participation has no results and the US condition is suspending enrichment but it has happened today without satisfying the US condition."

Ahmadinejad had vowed on Wednesday that Iran would make no concessions and that further sanctions would not force it to back down.

Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons, insisting that its programme is designed to provide energy for its growing population when the leading OPEC member's reserves of fossil fuels run out.

Permanent Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany have made Iran an offer, which includes trade incentives and help with a civilian nuclear programme in return for suspending enrichment.

The New York Times on Tuesday released what it said was a two-page informal document that outlined Tehran's approach to talks in Geneva and was distributed by Iranian negotiators.

The paper called for seven more rounds of talks, stressed the need for an end to sanctions, and made no mention of an incentives package.

Iranian officials have repeatedly said they have no intention of freezing enrichment and that as a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has the right to make its own nuclear fuel.

Vice President Reza Aghazadeh said on Thursday that the negotiations with the world powers could be used to resolve wider Middle East problems from the conflict in Iraq to surging oil prices.

The standoff has stirred fears of Israeli or US military strikes against Iran, as US President George W. Bush has insisted Washington would keep all options on the table. It has also sent oil prices spiralling upward.

Iran has repeatedly vowed a crushing response to any aggression against its soil, with Iranian officials warning that the military would target Israel and dozens of US bases in the region in retaliation.