

Iran, Russia have enrichment agreement

Centralized enrichment is an economic way to go and it stops politicians making war.

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Iranian nuclear chief Gholamreza Aghazadeh said a basic agreement had been reached Sunday with Russia for the establishment of a joint uranium enrichment venture.

Aghazadeh, who heads Iran's Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and is also the country's vice president, told a news conference that the two countries "have reached a basic agreement on the creation of a joint venture (to enrich uranium)."

Such a deal could go a long way toward appeasing global concerns that Iran wants to build atomic bombs along with generating electricity. A failure to resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear program could lead to UN Security Council sanctions against the Tehran, further eroding already testy relations with the Islamic republic. Previous talks on Moscow's offer – backed by the United States and the European Union – had made no headway.

Aghazadeh and Kiriienko, who were jointly visiting a nuclear plant being built by Russia in this city on the Persian Gulf, said nuclear talks would continue in Moscow over the next few days, but gave no firm dates, the news agencies reported.

Russia has said that its enrichment offer was contingent on Iran resuming a moratorium on domestic enrichment, but Iranian officials have rejected such a link and in the past insisted on their right to a domestic program.

Kiriienko appeared to refer to the issue when he was quoted by Russian media as saying that setting up the joint enrichment venture on the Russian soil was just "one of the elements in the complex of issues related to the Iranian nuclear problem." He also said after several days of talks with Iranian officials that "negotiations weren't going simply and easily."

But he was quoted as saying that "there were practically no technical, organizational and financial problems left" in talks on the Russian proposal.

Kiriienko also said that Moscow will insist on keeping the issue within the International Atomic Energy Agency when the IAEA considers the issue on March 6. The IAEA meeting was ahead of a possible Security Council discussion on the issue.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in Moscow that his country will continue efforts to help resolve the crisis. "Contacts will continue until the IAEA board meeting on March 6," Lavrov said, according to the Interfax, ITAR-Tass and RIA Novosti news agencies.

Also Sunday, Iran played down a secret nuclear project that US intelligence has linked to warhead design, saying it would offer information on it to the IAEA. "We will discuss the issue, and the rumors surrounding it, with the agency. It is not very sensitive or ambiguous," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said when asked about the secret project known as "Green Salt."

Asefi confirmed that an IAEA team was in Tehran to discuss the country's nuclear program.

Iran has denied seeking atomic weapons and more than three years of IAEA probing have failed to produce concrete evidence. But the agency discovered suspicious activity, including plutonium experiments and long-secret efforts to develop enrich uranium.

Public mention of the "Green Salt Project" first surfaced in an IAEA report drawn up earlier this month for a meeting of the agency's 35-nation board of governors. The meeting ended with the board reporting Tehran to the Security Council over concerns it could be hiding a nuclear weapons program.

Speaking to reporters in a weekly news conference, Asefi said his country expects the next session of the board of governors of the agency to be held on a "nonpolitical, independent and professional" basis. Asefi reiterated that Iran would continue its nuclear fuel research activities and would not give in its nuclear right under pressure and the "bullying language."