

Moscow Mulls Iran's Offer to Visit Sites

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Russia is considering Tehran's invitation to visit Iranian nuclear facilities but has questions about the offer and wants to be certain such a tour would be useful, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Tuesday.

"We received this initiative with interest," Ryabkov told reporters in the first official comment on a controversial invitation received last week to diplomats from selected nations to tour sites that Western governments suspect of being involved in a weapons program.

"We believe that the Iranian side in this way has demonstrated readiness to enter a certain dialogue on important issues," Ryabkov said, taking a cautiously positive tone on an invitation widely seen by analysts as a stalling tactic.

"But we have our own questions and desires on this account. All these questions are being discussed, including with our Iranian partners," Ryabkov added.

On Jan. 4, Iran invited Russia, China, the European Union and others to visit key nuclear facilities in the coming weeks, but snubbed the United States, Britain, France and Germany — the nations most opposed to its nuclear program.

EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton said Friday that the European Union would reject the offer, and Western diplomats have said Russia and China were being actively discouraged from going on the tour.

The selective nature of the invite fuelled concerns in the West that the initiative was a ploy to play for time and, ahead of talks with Iran next week, drive a wedge between the powerful nations seeking to ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons.

Russia's response was in line with its traditional emphasis on the need for dialogue and its warnings that isolating Iran can be counterproductive, but it could spark Western concerns that Moscow is helping Tehran stall.

Ryabkov, who is the Foreign Ministry's point man on Iran, did not say what Russia wanted to know about the offer or what conditions there might be for acceptance.

But he signaled that Russia would only agree to such a tour if it were confident that it would elicit real information and help clarify Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

"We believe that in the final result an optimal solution could be found that would enable such a visit to be conducted for the benefit for removing the international community's concerns about Iran's nuclear program," Ryabkov said.

Iran invited the diplomats to visit the Natanz uranium enrichment plant and the Arak heavy water complex.

Russia has built Iran's first nuclear power plant and has long taken a softer stance than Western nations on Tehran's nuclear program. But Moscow has pleased the United States with a shift in the past year, approving new United Nations sanctions against Iran in June and barring the sale of air-defense missiles to Tehran.

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