

Lavrov Seeks to Ease Sanctions on Iran

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Lavrov waving with Turkish counterpart Davutoglu in Istanbul on Thursday. **Murad Sezer**

ISTANBUL — Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday that two-day talks with world powers over Iran's nuclear program should address ways of easing sanctions on Tehran.

Expectations of any breakthrough in an eight-year standoff over Iran's nuclear ambitions were low ahead of a second round of negotiations between Iran and six powers in the Turkish city of Istanbul on Friday and Saturday.

The six dealing with Iran via European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton are the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany, and there were resurfacing signs of differences within the group that Iran has sought to exploit.

Speaking on the eve of the talks, Lavrov said they should look at prospects for relieving punitive sanctions on Tehran. He criticized the United States and European Union for imposing sanctions unilaterally that went beyond those agreed by the UN Security Council last June.

There is international concern that Iran's declared civilian nuclear energy program is a cover

for pursuit of atom bombs. Escalating economic sanctions have been slapped on Tehran over its refusal to curb nuclear work and make it more transparent.

Those are the powers' goals in negotiations with Iran, which has said its uranium enrichment drive is a sovereign right and not negotiable because it is solely for electricity generation.

The Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television news channel reported Thursday that Iran would propose a revised version of a swap that was agreed on in principle at a 2009 round of talks and then unraveled. But Iranian officials denied any such intentions.

"I haven't heard about it," Ali Baqeri, a deputy to Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, said as the Iranian delegation arrived in Istanbul on Thursday.

Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, told a news conference in Moscow that Tehran was ready to discuss a swap on the basis of the one hatched in October 2009 and then revived last May by Brazil and Turkey.

The proposal was for Iran to part with 1,200 kilograms of its low-enriched uranium — roughly the amount needed for a bomb if refined to a high level of fissile purity. It was then to be enriched to 20 percent and made into fuel assemblies for a Tehran medical research reactor now running out of such fuel.

Signaling determination to keep up pressure on Iran, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told television network ABC that President Barack Obama's administration might propose new unilateral sanctions on Iran, one of the world's largest oil exporters.

But Lavrov said unilateral sanctions were "spoilers" and the talks in Istanbul should look at ways of rolling back sanctions.

"We explained to our partners in the United States and the European Union what we think about unilateral sanctions, and we hope they have heard us," Lavrov said at a joint news conference with Turkey's foreign minister. "It is counterproductive to continuing our common efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue."

He said that if an approach for future talks on unresolved issues were agreed on in Istanbul, that would be "a good result."

"But this meeting doesn't have just one topic. Canceling the sanctions against Iran should also be discussed," he said.

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