

6-Way Talks With Iran to Start Anew

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BRUSSELS — Six world powers have accepted an Iranian offer for talks on its disputed nuclear program, the European Union's top diplomat said Tuesday.

The announcement by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton came shortly after Russia called for a resumption of face-to-face dialogue as soon as possible, saying an Iranian letter last month showed that it was now ready for serious negotiations.

"I would like to underscore Russia's interest in the Iranian side and the 'Group of Six' reaching agreement on a date and site for the resumption of the negotiations process as quickly as possible," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said.

A Foreign Ministry official said Iran had shown by its words and actions that it was ready for a serious discussion and that the break in talks should not be allowed to drag on much longer.

Iran's nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, wrote to Ashton in February saying Tehran wanted to reopen negotiations and offering to bring unspecified "new initiatives" to the table.

"Today I have replied to Dr. Jalili's letter of Feb. 14," Ashton, speaking on behalf of the six

powers after weeks of consultations with them, said in a statement. "I have offered to resume talks with Iran on the nuclear issue."

Ashton, who represents the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany in dealings with Iran, said the date and venue for the talks would now have to be determined.

"Our overall goal remains a comprehensive, negotiated, long-term solution that restores international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program while respecting Iran's right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy," Ashton said in her reply to Jalili.

Western states are likely to tread cautiously, mindful of past accusations that Iran's willingness to talk has been a stalling tactic to blunt pressure and not a route to agreement.

The Islamic republic's latest approach to the six powers coincides with unprecedented pain inflicted on its economy by expanding oil and financial sanctions.

The resumption of talks nonetheless could slow a drift toward military strikes to knock out Iran's nuclear program, which the West fears aims to develop an atomic bomb and Tehran says is for peaceful energy purposes only.

Israel, which says its existence could be threatened if Iran is allowed to develop nuclear weapons, is losing confidence in Western efforts to rein in Iran with sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

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