

Iran Opens Uranium Mines as Nuclear Talks Hang in Balance

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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BRUSSELS — Iran said Tuesday that it had started production at two uranium mines and a yellow cake plant, declaring that Western opposition would not slow its nuclear program days after talks between Tehran and world powers failed to reach an accord.

The country opened the Saghand 1 and 2 uranium mines in the central city of Yazd, which will extract uranium from a depth of 350 meters, and the Shahid Rezaeinejad yellow cake plant at Ardakan to mark Iran's National Nuclear Technology Day, state news agency IRNA said.

Even though the latest round of negotiations made little apparent progress, world powers believe there are enough grounds to keep talking to Iran about its disputed nuclear program, a senior Western diplomat said on Monday.

"There is enough substance for these negotiations to continue," the diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, told reporters. "I would not expect a breakdown."

At a meeting in the Kazakh city of Almaty on Friday and Saturday, the six nations — the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany — tried to persuade Iran to give up its most sensitive uranium-enrichment work to allay concerns that Tehran was seeking the means to make atom bombs.

Iranian negotiators did not accept the offer — coupled with a pledge of modest relief from crippling economic sanctions — and the two sides failed even to agree to meet again.

But Western diplomats are at pains to show that diplomacy will continue, in part to avoid escalating tensions with Israel, which has threatened to bomb Iranian nuclear sites if negotiations and sanctions fail to force it to change course.

They are wary, however, of fueling criticism that Iran may be playing them for time. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Sunday that the negotiation process could not go forever.

"We are clear talks for [the sake of] talks are not acceptable," the senior diplomat added.

Some Western diplomats have said that while the two sides failed to bridge their differences in the decade-old dispute in Almaty, there was some optimism because of the apparent willingness of Iranian negotiators to engage in detailed discussions of their proposal.

Iran denies having any military intentions and says it needs nuclear power to generate electricity and for medical purposes. It wants the international community to recognize its right to enrich uranium and lift major economic sanctions.

The powers that argue international rules apply only to countries that subject their nuclear work to stringent oversight by the United Nations, something Iran refuses to do.

Following the failure of the Almaty talks, the six powers are seeking to reassess their approach to persuade the Iranian side to agree. In the coming days, the issue will come up during a meeting of foreign ministers of Group of Eight countries, which include all the six powers except China.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, who oversees diplomatic contacts with Iran on behalf of the six nations, will also discuss plans for further engagement with chief Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili in the coming days.

Iran's presidential election in June also fuels uncertainty abroad over Tehran's short-term approach to the nuclear dispute.

In Brussels, the senior diplomat said a lack of clarity on presidential candidates, for example, clouded the understanding of Iran's domestic politics.

"The internal power struggle has an impact on negotiations," the diplomat said. "The internal tensions have an influence on a process such as negotiations but we don't even know who the candidates will be."

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