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Monday 14 September 2009 06:00 GMT

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## Tough talk toward Iran as deadline month begins

Sat, 12 Sep 2009 16:36:20 GMT

There is no shortage of warnings that September could be a very bumpy month for Iran.

What is still missing, however, are clear signals from the US and its European allies on what specific new sanctions they could seek if Iran snubs their deadline to begin talks over its nuclear program.

Iran's top nuclear negotiator on September 1 offered some room for possible compromise. Saeed Jalili told reporters the Islamic republic was open to international dialogue, but gave no further details.

The comments were noted a day after during a six-nation meeting in Germany with envoys from the permanent UN Security Council nations - the US, France, Britain, Russia and China - to discuss Iran's nuclear program and possible strategies to promote talks.

But there will likely be no serious back peddling from sanction threats until it is clearer whether Iran is genuinely open for talks or just stalling as it struggles with deep internal upheaval after the disputed presidential elections in June.

German Foreign Ministry spokesman Jens Ploetner said Iran had not made any formal gestures to back up the nuclear negotiator's openings for dialogue.

"Consequently ... from our point of view nothing has changed," Ploetner said.

He added that the meeting near Frankfurt was not expected to produce concrete strategies, but offered a chance to review "possible negotiating options in the coming months."

Experts say there are several points where the West could particularly sting Tehran, including expanding the travel bans on officials, cutting off exports of gas station-ready fuel and targeting more of the overseas links to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

It is still too early for any clear plans to emerge.

President Barack Obama and key European allies have given Iran until this month to open negotiations on its uranium enrichment program and other aspects of the nuclear program. Washington has not set any specific deadlines beyond the end of the month, and has not clarified what it would consider an appropriate overture by Iran.

Western nations and others worry Iran could move toward development of nuclear arms. Iran's leaders, however, insist they seek only energy-producing reactors.

Germany and France - both important trade partners with Iran - have recently become far more forceful in their threats of possible sanctions.

In Berlin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stood alongside French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Monday in a show of unity with Washington that was clearly aimed at getting Iran's attention.

"Germany and France will be united in calling for a strengthening of sanctions" if Iran stonewalls the West, said Sarkozy. Added Merkel: "Iran should know that we mean this very seriously."

The only hint about the direction of possible new measures has come from Merkel, who spoke of stiffer restrictions in the "energy, financial and other important sectors."

Sarkozy said Monday there were "many ideas" on potential sanctions, but stressed the "whole international community" should back any further crackdowns on Iran.



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This could prove difficult.

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China and Russia - members of the UN Security Council - are unlikely to back harsh steps against Iran because of deep interests. Russia built Iran's first nuclear reactor, which is scheduled to begin operations later this year. And China desperately wants Iranian oil and gas to fuel its growth.

Iran has faced a near blanket US economic freeze since shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. UN-imposed sanctions also have banned exports of nuclear-related technology and froze assets of top companies and officials, including some linked to the Revolutionary Guard such as foreign branches of Bank Sepah.

Iran has managed to ride out the restrictions without serious hardships, although lack of significant foreign investment has left the economy stuck in low gear for years. Iranian leaders - particularly President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - have repeatedly insisted that Iran would never abandon its ability to make its own nuclear fuel.

This crucial point was not addressed in the statement by the nuclear negotiator Jalili.

"Iran has prepared to present its revised package of proposals ... and is ready to hold talks with world powers ... in order to ease common concerns in the international arena," the state TV quoted Jalili as saying.

The head of the UN nuclear agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, urged for a possible lowering of the rhetoric from the West.

ElBaradei said he believes the immediate threat from a possible Iranian nuclear arsenal has been "hyped" and suggested there was cause for concern - but not panic.

"We have not seen concrete evidence that Tehran has an ongoing nuclear weapons program," the International Atomic Energy Agency chief was quoted by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in its September/October issue.

The UN Security Council plus Germany offered Iran a host of economic incentives in 2008 in exchange for suspending uranium enrichment. The proposals failed to sway Iranian leaders.

One of Iran's weakest points is its dependence on fuel imports. Despite its vast oil resources, it lacks the refinery capacity to meet its own demand and must buy vast quantities of commercial-ready fuel on the open market.

US lawmakers are considering a proposal to allow Obama to impose sanctions on foreign companies involved in exporting gasoline and other refined petroleum products to Iran.

"But would a ban on gasoline sales bring the regime to its knees, bring the population into the streets? That's not certain," said Francois Nicollaud, a former French ambassador to Iran.

Anthony Seaboyer, an analyst at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, said blocking refined fuel imports would "would significantly hurt Iran," but getting full international cooperation could prove very difficult.

Other possible steps could include wider travel restrictions against Iranian officials and efforts to further cut off the financial web of the Revolutionary Guard, which has various links to banks such as Sepah and other Iranian institutions around the world.

But without China and Russia on board, no barrage of sanctions can truly rattle Iran's rulers, said Ted Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign studies at the Cato Institute in Washington.

"Will these possible new sanctions bite a bit? Yes. Will they cause Iran to back off its high-priority projects such as its nuclear program? No," he said. "To do this, there would have to be excruciating sanctions in place and that is not about to happen."

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