

Tough talk toward Iran as deadline month begins

By BRIAN MURPHY (AP) – 1 hour ago

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — 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 U.S. 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 Tuesday offered some room for possible compromise. Saeed Jalili told reporters the Islamic regime was open to international dialogue, but gave no further details.

The comments were noted Wednesday during a six-nation meeting in Germany with envoys from the permanent U.N. Security Council nations — the U.S., France, Britain, Russia and China — to discuss Iran's nuclear ambitions and possible strategies to make Tehran commit into 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 hints 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.

This could prove difficult.

China and Russia — members of the U.N. 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 U.S. economic freeze since shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. U.N.-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 repeated 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 U.N. nuclear agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, urged for a possible lowering of the

AP Associated Press



In this photo released by the Iranian semi-official Mehr News Agency, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, attends a press conference in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2009. Iran's state TV is quoting the country's top nuclear negotiator as saying Tehran is ready to cooperate with world powers to ease fears over its nuclear program and has prepared a revised package of proposals to present to western countries. (AP Photo/Mehr News Agency, Baqer Nasir)

Map

