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Iran nuclear plans: Bushehr fuel to be unloaded



The Bushehr nuclear plant has been hit by repeated delays

Iran has confirmed it is having to remove nuclear fuel from the reactor at the Bushehr power plant, the latest in a series of delays to hit the project.

On Friday, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said it had new information on "possible military dimensions" to Iran's nuclear plans, which Iran says are purely peaceful.

The IAEA will supervise the unloading of fuel from Bushehr, Iran's nuclear envoy Ali Asghar Soltanieh said.

Iran began the Bushehr project in 1976.

Iran's Fars news agency says the fuel is being removed for "technical reasons".

The fuel at Bushehr is being provided by Russia, which built the plant and whose engineers will carry out the unloading, under the supervision of the IAEA.

"Upon a demand from Russia, which is responsible for completing the Bushehr nuclear power plant, fuel assemblies from the core of the reactor will be unloaded for a period of time to carry out tests and take technical measurements," Mr Soltanieh said, according to the semi-official Isna news agency.

Computer virus?

The BBC's Tehran correspondent, James Reynolds, says diplomats suggest the entire core of the Bushehr plant is being replaced - potentially a serious problem.

There has been some speculation that the Stuxnet computer virus may be responsible, our correspondent says.

Analysts say Stuxnet - which caused problems at another Iranian enrichment facility last year - has been specially configured to damage motors commonly used in uranium-enrichment centrifuges by sending them spinning out of control.

Some experts believe that the problems at Bushehr call into question the safety and

effectiveness of Iran's nuclear facilities as a whole, our correspondent says.

The IAEA report - obtained by the BBC and made available online [by the Institute for Science and International Security \(Isis\)](#) - says Iran is "not implementing a number of its obligations."

These include "clarification of the remaining outstanding issues which give rise to concerns about possible military dimensions to its nuclear programme".

Six world powers are negotiating with Iran over its nuclear programme, and the country is subject to United Nations Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment.

Enriched uranium can be used for civilian nuclear purposes, but also to build atomic bombs.

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UN concern over 'military angle to Iran nuclear plan'



Iran has always denied its nuclear programme is aiming to develop weapons

Iran nuclear crisis

The UN's nuclear watchdog says it has received new information on "possible military dimensions" to Iran's nuclear development programme.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said the report raised "further concerns" about Iran's activities.

It urged Tehran to co-operate fully with its investigations in alleged weapons experiments, saying it had not done since 2008.

Iran insists its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful.

The IAEA report was obtained by the BBC and made available online [by the Institute for Science and International Security \(Isis\)](#).

It says Iran is "not implementing a number of its obligations including clarification of the remaining outstanding issues which give rise to concerns about possible military dimensions to

its nuclear programme".

The country was also "not providing the necessary co-operation to enable the Agency to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities".

"Based on the agency's analysis of additional information since August 2008, including new information recently received, there are further concerns which the agency also needs to clarify with Iran," says the report.

Among those concerns were that Iran was not engaging with the IAEA on allegations that it was developing a nuclear payload for its missiles.

Six world powers are negotiating with Iran over its nuclear programme, and the country is subject to United Nations Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment.

Enriched uranium can be used for civilian nuclear purposes, but also to build atomic bombs.

The UN has imposed four sets of sanctions on Iran over the years.

While these have made it more difficult for Iran to acquire equipment, technology and finance to support its nuclear activities, they have not stopped trading in oil and gas - the major sources of Iran's income.

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Foreign powers 'disappointed' at Iran nuclear talks



Baroness Ashton: "The choice remains in Iran's hands"

Foreign powers negotiating with Tehran on its nuclear programme say they are "disappointed" after a round of talks ended without progress in Istanbul.

EU foreign policy chief Baroness Ashton, who led the international team, said Iran had come to the talks with pre-conditions.

While no date was set for new talks, she said the "door remained open".

Iran's chief negotiator said any deal should be based on Tehran's right to uranium enrichment.

The US and other Western powers say Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon, a charge Iran denies.

A US diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Washington believed diplomatic channels remained open to tackle concerns over Iran's nuclear programme.

"We continue to believe that there is time and space for diplomacy," the diplomat told AFP news agency.

Revised deal

Baroness Ashton led a delegation from France, Germany, Russia, the UK, US and China, at the two-day talks.

The international team had proposed a new version of a plan to keep Iranian enrichment within civilian-grade levels by having it send uranium abroad to be processed.

Analysis



James Reynolds BBC Iran correspondent, Istanbul

A day and a half of talks about Iran's nuclear programme appear to have achieved nothing. There was no breakthrough. What is more, the two sides have not even agreed to meet again. The lead negotiator for the world powers, Catherine Ashton, told a news conference that her side had put forward specific proposals during the negotiations but she said that it had become clear that the Iranian side was not ready for a detailed discussion.

Catherine Ashton said that her side's proposals remained on the table and that Iran knew her phone number.

At a separate news conference, Iran's chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, spoke more generally. He said that he hoped negotiations based on what he called common vision and logic would come about. Mr Jalili stressed that Iran's nuclear programme was peaceful, but his word alone is not enough for the countries who now say they will wait for Iran to call.

But Western diplomatic sources have spoken of anger and frustration over Iran's behaviour at the talks.

Baroness Ashton said Iran's pre-conditions were "not the way to proceed".

"We had hoped to embark on a discussion of practical ways forward, and have made every effort to make that happen. I am disappointed to say that this has not been possible," she said. "No new talks have been planned."

Baroness Ashton added: "The door remains open, the choice remains in Iran's hands."

She told reporters that her team had offered Iran "practical steps... to move forward".

One of the steps mentioned by Baroness Ashton was an updated fuel swap plan.

No details were given of how the plan, rejected in its original form by Iran in 2009, had been updated.

The original proposal, brokered by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), would have seen Iran sending 70% of its low-enriched uranium (fuel enriched to 3.5%) to Russia for re-processing into higher-grade (20%) fuel rods.

The fuel rods would have then been returned to Iran for use in a research reactor.

The plan was designed to stop Iran having an excuse to further enrich uranium, or work towards enriching to the degree necessary to make a bomb (90%).

'Iran's right'

Iran's chief negotiator Saeed Jalili said after the talks ended: "Any kind of talks and co-operation, as I underlined during the talks with Mrs Ashton, should be based on respecting nations' rights, including Iran's right to nuclear technology."

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2009 fuel swap proposal

- Iran would have sent most of its low-enriched (ie enriched to 3.5%) uranium to Russia for re-processing
- Uranium enriched in Russia to research reactor grade (20%) would have been returned to Iran as fuel rods
- The scheme would have removed Iran's reasons to enrich uranium further
- Scheme fell apart after Iran started enriching uranium up to 20% in Feb 2010

He denied setting pre-conditions for the talks and accused the six powers of seeking to impose their own preconditions, pushing not "dialogue but dictation".

Iran had offered to swap batches of low-enriched uranium for fuel rods but on its own soil.

Correspondents say Iran feared it might not get back its uranium and end up with no fuel rods at all.

The scheme began to look redundant last February when Iran announced it was itself enriching uranium to 20%.

The UN has imposed four sets of sanctions on Iran over the years.

While these have make it more difficult for Iran to acquire equipment, technology and finance to support its nuclear activities, they have not stopped trading in oil and gas - the major sources of Iran's income.

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Iran nuclear talks under way in Istanbul



Tehran insists its nuclear programme is for peaceful civilian purposes

Major world powers have begun two days of talks with Iran over its controversial nuclear programme.

Diplomats meeting in Turkey are expected to revive a fuel-swap plan, where Iran gives up nuclear material in return for fuel for a research reactor.

US diplomats warned that major breakthroughs were unlikely.

The West suspects Iran aims to build nuclear weapons, and has imposed economic sanctions.

Tehran insists its nuclear programme is peaceful.

Negotiators from China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and US are meeting Iranian officials on Friday and Saturday in Istanbul.

The talks are being chaired by European Union foreign policy chief Baroness Ashton.

US state department spokesman Mark Toner said Washington was "not expecting any big breakthroughs".

Analysis

James Reynolds BBC Iran correspondent

The countries negotiating with Iran are preparing to revive an old offer: a fuel swap. In broad terms, Iran would agree to give up an agreed amount of its low-enriched uranium. In return, the world powers would provide fuel for a research reactor in Tehran.

Western diplomats call this a confidence-building measure, or a first step. But even a first step may be extremely difficult to agree.

This is the third time in the past year and a half that the idea of a uranium-for-fuel swap has been addressed. A first version of this deal was agreed in October 2009 - but it collapsed shortly afterwards. Then, in May 2010, Brazil and Turkey brokered another version on their own with Iran. But this second deal was rejected by the West. Now, it looks like negotiators will try for a third time.

He said the aim was to establish a "constructive process" which would see Iran "engaging and addressing the international community's concerns about its nuclear programme".

New swap offer

In recent years these negotiations have achieved almost nothing, says the BBC's Iran correspondent James Reynolds, in Istanbul.

Because of this, Western diplomats suggest that they have set only one immediate goal for this round of talks.

They want to persuade Iran to start getting rid of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, estimated to be about three tonnes, our correspondent says.

With further enrichment, this would be enough to make several nuclear weapons.

The sticking point is likely to be the amount of enriched uranium that Iran is prepared to give up.

Western diplomats want to make sure that there is not enough enriched uranium left inside Iran to build a single bomb.

Nuclear Fuel Cycle

- Mined uranium ore is purified and reconstituted into solid form known as yellowcake

- Yellowcake is chemically processed and converted into uranium hexafluoride gas
- Gas is fed through centrifuges, where its isotopes separate and process is repeated until uranium is enriched
- Low-level enriched uranium is used for nuclear fuel
- Highly enriched uranium can be used in nuclear weapons
- [In depth: Nuclear fuel cycle](#)

In an effort to achieve this, there are reports that the negotiators are preparing to once again propose a fuel-swap deal.

Under such a deal Iran would give up an agreed amount of its low-enriched uranium. In return the world powers would provide fuel for a research reactor in Tehran.

However, it would be the third time in recent years that the idea of a uranium-for-fuel swap has been proposed.

A first version of this deal was agreed in October 2009, but collapsed shortly afterwards.

In May 2010, Brazil and Turkey brokered another version on their own with Iran - but the deal was rejected by the West.

Meanwhile, the UK's [Guardian newspaper has published a leaked US diplomatic cable from 2009](#) suggesting that American experts believed Tehran had the "technical ability" to make highly enriched uranium - which can be used in weapons.

The cable shows, however, that other international experts at the same meeting disagreed with the American view.

Stuxnet virus: Russia warns of "Iranian Chernobyl"

Tehrān : Iran | Jan 17, 2011

By [Gino C. Matibag](#) 

Western intelligence said that Iran had been warned by Russian nuclear experts of a possible Chernobyl-style nuclear explosion in the country's controversial Bushehr reactor due to the damage brought about by the mysterious Stuxnet virus, [The Telegraph](#) reported on 17 January.

As Russian nuclear scientists assist Iran in its attempt to activate the first nuclear power complex at the Gulf port, they raised serious concerns on the massive damage to the computer systems by the mysterious Stuxnet virus.

The computer virus was discovered last year. It is widely believed to be the result of a sophisticated US-Israeli cyber attack.

The Kremlin was advised by the Russian scientists that Iran could be facing "another Chernobyl" if they were forced to comply with the deadline to activate the plant this coming summer.

Iran pushes for the deadline set last year and argued that any delay would be a blow to the

country's prestige.

The nuclear plant had long been delayed. It was first commissioned in the 70s by the Shah.

The Bushehr reactor is expected to generate its first electricity for the country's national grid this summer. The first nuclear rods were loaded in to the reactor by the Russians last October.

More details in this [link](#).

WikiLeaks cables: Iran has cleared major hurdle to nuclear weapons

Tehran has 'technical ability' to make highly enriched uranium, say experts, as efforts turn to disrupting supply of other materials

- [Julian Borger](#), diplomatic editor
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Thursday 20 January 2011 16.16 GMT



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, inspects gas centrifuges used to enrich uranium at the Natanz nuclear plant. Photograph: IRAN'S PRESIDENCY OFFICE HANDOUT/EPA
US officials believe [Iran](#) now has the "technical ability" to make highly enriched uranium, an essential step towards building a nuclear bomb, according to a leaked US diplomatic cable.

At a meeting of international nuclear experts in Vienna, a US representative said that "Iran had now demonstrated centrifuge operations such that it had the [technical ability to produce highly enriched uranium \(HEU\)](#) if it so chose". The meeting in April 2009 was hosted by Britain's ambassador to Austria, Simon Smith.

The revelation comes as nuclear talks resume between Iranian officials and representatives of

six world powers in Istanbul tomorrow. Expectations of compromise are low.

Not all western governments share the US conclusion, but if true it suggests international sanctions have failed to deny Iran the know-how required to make a nuclear bomb. The production of HEU is generally agreed to be the most serious obstacle any aspiring nuclear state must overcome.

Diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to curb its programme have also failed to produce results. In the days running up to the two-day meeting in Istanbul, Iranian officials have repeated they will not bow to UN security council demands to suspend uranium enrichment. Iran insists its programme is entirely peaceful.

Western strategy is increasingly focused on delaying Iranian progress, buying time in the hope that economic pressure will eventually lead to a change of mind in Tehran. The campaign has had some recent success in the form of covert sabotage – [the Stuxnet computer worm, reportedly a US-Israeli project](#), slowed down Iran's uranium enrichment last year. Other efforts have involved finding bottlenecks in the Iranian programme and trying to tighten them.

Leaked US cables describe the outline of this containment policy. They reveal:

- Russia has vowed never to allow Iran to make its own fuel for a Russian-built nuclear power station at Bushehr.
- British officials have predicted Iran will amass 20 tonnes of low enriched uranium by 2014 – enough, if further enriched, to make 19 warheads.
- In 2008, Washington launched a worldwide campaign to cut off Iran's supplies of a high-strength steel, known as maraging steel, and carbon fibre. Access to these materials has been identified as a bottleneck in its enrichment programme.

Iran has always maintained its programme is intended for the generation of electricity, but its one nuclear power station, [at Bushehr on the Gulf coast](#), is licensed to use only Russian-made fuel rods for its first 10 fuel loads, enough for just over 10 years.

At the April 2009 meeting in Vienna, Russian officials assured their colleagues that even after that period "[Russia expects to supply fuel for the lifetime of Bushehr](#) and it would not agree to provide Iran the necessary technology/licence [to make its own fuel for the Bushehr reactor](#)".

The experts at the Vienna meeting – from Britain, the US, Russia, France, China and Germany – noted that Iran had almost exhausted the original 531-tonne stock of the yellowcake it bought from South Africa in the 1980s.

[According to the 2009 US embassy cable](#): "The French explained that [Iran's current uranium stockpile was dwindling](#), with less than 100 tonnes of uranium remaining."

British experts argued however that the focus on uranium ore was a red herring as Iran had already converted enough of it into uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) gas – the form in which uranium can be enriched in centrifuges – to keep the enrichment plant in Natanz running "for several years".

The 2009 Vienna meeting agreed Iran would need 1.5 tonnes of low-enriched UF₆ to make an initial bomb, then another tonne for each subsequent device. The UK calculated that by 2014,

Iran would have amassed 20 tonnes – enough for 19 warheads.

Britain officials now say that estimate might have to be lowered. Last year proved disastrous for Natanz – it had continual centrifuge breakdowns and suffered a complete shutdown for several days in November.

That was in part due to the Stuxnet computer worm but western officials say other sabotage operations have taken a toll, as has the inherent unreliability of the rudimentary and outdated IR-1 centrifuge design used by Iran.

The IR-1 is based on a design bought from Pakistan. It is built of a specialised aluminium and maraging steel, a rare commodity that has proved one of the most effective bottlenecks on the whole programme.

Olli Heinonen, formerly the IAEA's head inspector and now a senior fellow at Harvard University, said he believed Iran had enough material to make 12,000 centrifuges based on what is known about its overseas purchases. The estimate is shared by some European officials.

If correct, Iran has almost run out of centrifuge parts. It has made 11,000, of which 2,000 are believed to be broken and another 5,000 have been taken out of service. That leaves only 4,000 IR-1s enriching uranium at Natanz.

Efforts have now shifted to stopping Iran building new-generation centrifuges which use lighter carbon fibre rotors and are thought to be at least five times more efficient.

"This is really important for the future of the programme. IR-1s are relatively fragile and inefficient," Heinonen said.

Washington raised the alarm in 2008 and launched a worldwide campaign aimed at cutting off carbon fibre shipments to Iran. Cables [were sent to US diplomats in European capitals](#) and Beijing with lists of producers of carbon fibre and related equipment who were to be alerted to any suspicious orders.

A few months later, in the last days of the Bush administration, the state department was scrambling to head off a [shipment to Iran of 25 tonnes of maraging steel](#). It is not clear whether it succeeded.

Ultimately, western officials admit Iran will find a way around any effort to stop the programme. At best, they say, it can only be delayed – its future will ultimately be decided by the leadership in Tehran.

7 January 2011 Last updated at 12:18 GMT

EU spurns offer of Iran nuclear sites tour



Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant was built with Russian help

The European Union plans to reject Iran's invitation for an EU ambassador to tour Iran's nuclear sites.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Baroness Ashton, said it was the job of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to examine Iran's nuclear sites.

Iran says it will open its nuclear facilities to envoys from several countries, including Russia and China, but not the US.

Many Western countries suspect Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Iran insists that its nuclear programme is for civilian purposes only.

"What I'll be saying is the role of the inspections of nuclear sites is for the IAEA and I do hope Iran will ensure that the IAEA is able to go and continue and fulfil its work," Baroness Ashton told Reuters news agency on Friday.

Earlier the US State Department dismissed Iran's offer of an inspection tour by diplomats as a "clever ploy".

The last such trip which Tehran arranged was in February 2007.

Iran said the visit would take place ahead of a second round of talks on its nuclear programme, scheduled for late January in Istanbul, Turkey, although no date has been confirmed.

Iran is set to hold talks with the five permanent UN Security Council members - the US, Russia, China, the UK and France - plus Germany.

8 January 2011 Last updated at 14:38 GMT

Iran claims nuclear technology breakthrough



Tehran insists its nuclear programme is for peaceful civilian purposes

Iran's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi says his country is now capable of making the fuel plates and rods used inside nuclear reactors.

Western analysts have previously said the Islamic republic did not possess such technology.

The US and other Western nations suspect that Iran is attempting to build nuclear weapons.

Tehran strongly denies the accusation, saying its nuclear programme is for peaceful civilian purposes.

Mr Salehi told Fars news agency that Iran had completed construction of a facility in the city of Isfahan to produce the plates and rods.

"We have built an advanced manufacturing unit in the Isfahan site for the fuel plates," Mr Salehi, who is also acting foreign minister, told Fars news agency.

"A grand transformation has taken place in the production of plates and rods. With the completion of the unit in Isfahan, we are one of the few countries which can produce fuel rods and fuel plates."

Fuel rods are designed to contain enriched uranium and are housed inside the nuclear reactor.

'Reality and truth'

Mr Salehi's comments come ahead of the next round of talks in Istanbul between Iran and six world powers - the US, UK, China, Russia, France and Germany - over Tehran's nuclear programme.

Mr Salehi said that Western policies had motivated Iran to reach its current level of nuclear technology, including the production of nuclear plates and rods.

"What we say is based on reality and truth. There is no exaggeration or deception in our work. It is them who do not want to believe that Iran has no intention but to obtain nuclear technology for peaceful purposes."

Iran is subject to United Nations Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment. Enriched uranium can be used for civilian nuclear purposes, but also to build atomic bombs.

Iranian nuclear scientist 'tortured on

suspicion of revealing state secrets'

Shahram Amiri, who claimed he was abducted by CIA, has not been seen since return from US last year

- [Julian Borger](#) and [Saeed Kamali Dehghan](#)
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Tuesday 4 January 2011 17.26 GMT



After being welcomed home as a hero last year, Shahram Amiri (pictured holding son Amir Hossein) has been held and tortured in Iran, according to a US-based website. Photograph: Vahid Salemi/AP

An Iranian nuclear scientist who claimed to have been abducted by the CIA and who [returned to a hero's welcome in Tehran](#) in July has been imprisoned and tortured on suspicion of giving away state secrets, according to an opposition website.

Iranbriefing.net – run by a US-based group that normally reports on political prisoners and the activities of [Iran's](#) revolutionary guard – said the scientist, Shahram Amiri, had been interrogated intensively for three months in Tehran before spending two months in solitary confinement, where his treatment left him hospitalised for a week.

The Tehran authorities would not confirm or deny the account. Asked to comment, a spokesman for Iran's judiciary said: "I haven't heard anything about this [his arrest] and I don't have any information regarding this matter."

Amiri has not been seen in public in the six months since his much-publicised homecoming from America, where he claimed to have been held against his will. State media portrayed him at the time as a daring patriot who had escaped from his alleged CIA captors with critical

information about US covert operations against Iran.

US officials, surprised by Amiri's unexpected return to Iran, insisted he had gone to the US willingly. However, there was concern in US intelligence circles that his original "defection" in [Saudi Arabia](#) in 2009 could have been a trap to embarrass the CIA and trick its officials into revealing how much the US knows about the Iranian nuclear programme.

The evidence is contradictory. During his time in the US, Amiri appeared to have made three videos – one saying he had decided to continue his studies in the US, another saying he was being held captive and a third claiming to be on the run from the CIA. He then presented himself to the Iranian interest section at the Pakistani embassy in Washington, asking to go home.

Independent but unverified reports from inside Iran said Amiri's family had been stripped of their passports and placed under close scrutiny after the scientist went missing on his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Western observers said his disappearance from public view since last summer strengthened their view that he had been forced to return by threats to his relatives. It is not yet clear whether a planned Iranian television drama based on the official version of his story will be aired as scheduled this year.

Amid the conflicting reports, it is clear that the struggle over Amiri is just one more battle in an increasingly ferocious secret war over Iran's nuclear programme that has seen two other Iranian scientists assassinated and a third injured in bomb attacks last year.

Iran has blamed western and Israeli intelligence for the attacks, and for a computer worm, known as Stuxnet, that caused centrifuges to malfunction at its uranium enrichment plant in Natanz.

Tehran also claimed last week that General Ali Reza Asgari, a former revolutionary guard commander and deputy defence minister who disappeared in Istanbul just over four years ago, was being held in an Israeli prison. Mohammad Raouf Sheybani, a deputy foreign minister, called for an international inquiry into Asgari's fate.

Covert operations against Iran's nuclear programme appear to have had some success in slowing it down. The main enrichment plant in Natanz stopped processing uranium altogether for a few days in November. But diplomatic efforts to persuade Tehran to suspend its programme in return for foreign technical and financial assistance have so far failed.

Talks in December between Iran and six major powers in Geneva led only to an agreement to meet again, in Turkey later this month. Tehran has invited selected foreign diplomats to tour some of its nuclear facilities ahead of the meeting. But the US, which is not invited, has dismissed the invitation as a propaganda ploy.

4 January 2011 Last updated at 07:54 GMT

Iran invites foreign diplomats to nuclear

sites



Diplomats will be shown Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, reports say
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Iran nuclear crisis

- [Fuelling Bushehr](#)
- [Squeezing Iran: Oil and sanctions](#)
- [Q&A: Nuclear issue](#)
- [UN sanctions](#)

Iran has confirmed that it has invited foreign diplomats to tour its nuclear facilities.

The invitation comes ahead of fresh talks with key world powers over Iran's controversial nuclear programme.

Delegates from Russia, China and the EU are reported to be among those invited, but it is not clear whether the offer was extended to officials from the US.

Many Western countries suspect Iran is developing nuclear weapons, but Tehran says its programme is peaceful.

"The representatives of some European Union countries, NAM [Non-Aligned Movement], and some representatives of the five-plus-one [six world powers] have been invited to visit our nuclear sites," foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast told reporters.

The visit is due to take place ahead of a new round of talks on Tehran's nuclear programme between Iran and the five permanent UN Security Council members - the US, Russia, China, the UK and France - plus Germany, to be held for Istanbul, Turkey, in late January.

The talks will follow a two-day meeting in Geneva early last month which EU foreign affairs chief Baroness Ashton described as "substantive".

Iran has invited Russia, China, the EU and its allies among the Arab and developing world, according to a letter seen by the Associated Press news agency.

Bushehr and Natanz were the venues to be toured, AP reports, citing a diplomat accredited to the IAEA.

Diplomatic tour

Tehran is already subject to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),

but it would appear that this tour may be aimed at diplomats, not inspectors, says the BBC's Iran correspondent James Reynolds.

The UN Security Council has imposed four rounds of sanctions on Iran and demanded that it stops its uranium enrichment programme.

Uranium can be enriched to make nuclear fuel or be more highly enriched and used in nuclear weapons.

Iranian negotiators have flatly ruled out discussing such demands at the Istanbul meeting.

29 December 2010 Last updated at 17:03 GMT

Israel - Iran nuclear bomb 'still three years away'



Iran denies that the Stuxnet worm has damaged its nuclear programme

Iran's nuclear programme has been hit by technical problems, and it could be still three years away from making a bomb, an Israeli minister has said.

The statement came a month after Iran said centrifuges used in uranium enrichment had been sabotaged.

There are suspicions, denied by Iran, that the centrifuges were targeted by the Stuxnet computer worm.

The West fears Iran's goal is to build nuclear weapons but Iran says its programme is for peaceful energy use.

Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Yaalon said the programme had faced "a number of technological challenges and difficulties".

"These difficulties have postponed the timetable," he told Israeli radio.

"So we can't talk about a point of no return. Iran does not have the ability to create nuclear weapons by itself at the moment."

Iran said in September that the Stuxnet worm had attacked its computers but denied that it had

damaged the nuclear programme.

However, experts say the worm has been specially configured to damage motors commonly used in uranium enrichment centrifuges by sending them spinning out of control.

The computer worm is a form of customised malware, written to attack a precise target.

Analysts say the complexity of the code suggests it was created by a "nation state" in the West, rather than an organised crime group.

Israel considers Iran the greatest threat to its security, because of the nuclear programme and anti-Israeli comments by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.