



DUBAI (Reuters) - Iran said it has found significant new deposits of raw uranium to feed its nuclear program and has identified sites for 16 more nuclear power stations, just days before talks with Western powers over its disputed atomic program.

The Iran Atomic Energy Organisation report cited by state news agency IRNA on Saturday said the deposits were found in "southern coastal areas" and had trebled the amount outlined in previous estimates.

There was no independent confirmation but with few uranium mines of its own, Western experts had previously thought that Iran may be close to exhausting its supply of raw uranium.

Diplomats say the United States and its allies - the so called P5+1 - are set to offer Iran some relief from their sanctions at the talks in Kazakhstan on Tuesday if it agrees to curb its production of higher grade enriched uranium.

The West says the production demonstrates Tehran's intent to develop a nuclear weapons capability, an allegation the Islamic republic denies.

The enriched uranium required for use in nuclear reactors or weapons is produced in centrifuges that spin uranium hexafluoride gas (UF₆) at high speeds. The UF₆ is derived in a reaction from yellow cake, a concentrate from uranium ore discovered in mines.

Iran's stock of reserves of raw uranium stood at around 4,400 tons taking into account discoveries over the past 18 months, IRNA quoted the report as saying.

In another announcement that is likely to concern the West, the report also said 16 sites had been identified for the construction of nuclear power stations.

It did not specify the exact locations but said they included coastal areas of the Gulf, Sea of Oman, Khuzestan province and in coastal areas of the Caspian Sea.

(Reporting by Marcus George; Editing by Alison Williams)