

U.S. to seek rare meeting with Iran on nuclear program

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GENEVA, Sept. 30 -- U.S. officials signaled Wednesday that they would seek a rare one-on-one meeting with Iranian diplomats during talks here on Thursday between Iran and other major powers on Tehran's nuclear program.

The talks, expected to last through the day, have been structured to allow both for group meetings and informal one-on-one discussions with Iran, which a senior administration official said would be "an opportunity to reinforce the main concerns we will be making in the meeting." He spoke on condition of anonymity because of the diplomatic sensitivity ahead of the talks.

President Obama has sought to make engagement with the Islamic Republic and other antagonistic nations a central part of his foreign policy, but until now Iran has spurned his efforts. Thursday's talks are intended to launch a process that could rein in Tehran's nuclear ambitions and possibly reorient Iran's role in the world, though U.S. officials are skeptical Tehran will act decisively, especially at this initial stage.

Nevertheless, the talks here could be the most substantial and in-depth conversation between the United States and Iran since relations were severed after the Iranian revolution 30 years ago. The chief U.S. negotiator, Undersecretary of State William J. Burns, is a career diplomat who joined in similar major-power talks last July in the final months of the Bush administration, but was barely permitted to speak under rules set by the White House.

"We are committed to meaningful negotiations to resolve what are growing international concerns about Iran's nuclear problem," the official said Wednesday. But, he added, "This cannot be an open-ended process, more talks for the sake of talks," especially after the revelation last week that Iran has a second uranium-enrichment plant under construction. "We need to see practical steps and measurable results and we need to see them starting quickly."

The chief Iranian negotiator, Saeed Jalili, is expected to press for acceptance of an Iranian proposal that would move beyond the nuclear issue and instead launch talks on a broad ranges of areas, including Afghanistan and reform of the United Nations. Whereas U.S. officials want to narrow the discussion to nuclear weapons, the Iranians want to broaden the topics on the table in order to test areas of cooperation with the United States. In Tehran Wednesday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told a Cabinet session that "this meeting is a test to measure the extent of sincerity and commitment of some countries to law and justice," according to the official IRNA news agency.

U.S. officials believe the revelation of the facility, hidden in an underground bunker near the holy city of Qom, has given them leverage heading into the talks. In a blow for Iran, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency on Wednesday said that Iran violated the rules on timely disclosure. "Iran was supposed to inform us on the day it was decided to construct the facility. They have not done that," said Mohamed ElBaradei in an interview with CNN-India.

U.S. officials said they would demand that the IAEA be given unfettered access to the facility, as well as people and documents, within weeks. Ahmadinejad last week floated the idea of the United States supplying enriched uranium for medical research as a confidence-building proposal, and U.S. officials said Wednesday that the proposal is being examined by the IAEA but there is no chance the United States would provide such material to Iran.

The other countries at the talks are Britain, France, Russia, Germany and China, many of which are sending their top professional diplomats. As a sign of U.S. seriousness -- and the intense media interest -- a substantial team of White House and State Department officials, including three spokesmen, is accompanying Burns. The massive press attention is also leading the Swiss government to shift the venue to another location still under discussion, officials said.

Another key player is Javier Solana, the European foreign policy chief and the chief interlocutor with the Iranians on behalf of the major powers. Solana is a nuclear specialist, having earned a doctorate in physics from the University of Virginia in 1971, and has been intimately involved in the effort to open up the Iranian nuclear program. Over the summer, however, he announced he would retire effective in October, leaving unclear who would fill his critical role.

Thursday's meeting is the culmination of a stop-and-go process that began in 2003 under the auspices of Britain, France and Germany, which were fearful that the U.S. and Iran were headed to an armed clash over the nuclear program. Iran suspended its program for two years, but the deal with the Europeans fell apart and Iran restarted enrichment activities after Ahmadinejad became president.

In 2005, the United States, Russia and China joined the European countries in trying to press Iran with a combination of sticks and carrots. But Iran repeatedly said the carrots -- economic and political incentives -- were not good enough and it

shrugged off the sticks, which came in the form of three U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding it halt enrichment activities.