

# **‘Fingers on the triggers’: Iran announces near weapons-grade uranium enrichment ‘as soon as possible’**

Iran said Saturday it plans to enrich uranium up to 20% at its underground Fordo nuclear facility “as soon as possible,” pushing its program a technical step away from weapons-grade levels as it increases pressure on the West over the tattered atomic deal.

The move comes amid heightened tensions between Iran and the U.S. in the waning days of the administration of President Donald Trump, who withdrew America from Tehran’s nuclear deal in 2018.

Trump called the Iran agreement the “worst deal ever negotiated,” deeming it “a disastrous one-sided deal that failed to end Iran’s nuclear program and the full range of the regime’s malign activity.”

Following that move, Iran continued to fund terror proxies in the Mideast that threaten American allies. In response, the U.S. launched a drone strike that killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad a year ago, an anniversary coming Sunday that has American officials now preparing possible retaliation by Iran.

Iran’s decision to begin enriching to 20% a decade ago nearly brought an Israeli strike targeting its nuclear facilities. A resumption of 20% enrichment could force Israel’s hand to take action.

According to Ali Akbar Salehi, the U.S.-educated head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, a supposedly “civilian” body, “We are like soldiers and our fingers are on the triggers”

“The commander should command and we shoot. We are ready for this and will produce (20% enriched uranium) as soon as possible,” Salehi told Iranian state television.

The White House had no immediate comment. A spokesman for President-elect

Joe Biden's transition team declined to comment on Iran's announcement.

Iran's serves as pressure ahead of the inauguration of President-elect Biden, who has said he is willing to re-enter the nuclear deal.

The International Atomic Energy Agency acknowledged Iran had informed its inspectors of the decision by a letter after news leaked overnight Friday.

"Iran has informed the agency that in order to comply with a legal act recently passed by the country's parliament, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran intends to produce low-enriched uranium ... up to 20 percent at the Fordo Fuel Enrichment Plant," the IAEA said in a statement.

The IAEA added Iran did not say when it planned to boost enrichment, though the agency claimed it "has inspectors present in Iran on a 24/7 basis and they have regular access to Fordo." The parliamentary bill also called on Iran to expel those inspectors.

Salehi said Iran would need to switch out natural uranium in centrifuges at Fordo for material already enriched to 4% to begin the process of going to 20%.

"It should be done under IAEA supervision," Salehi added.

Since the deal's collapse, Iran has resumed enrichment at Fordo, near the Shiite holy city of Qom, some 90 kilometers (55 miles) southwest of Tehran.

Shielded by the mountains, Fordo is ringed by anti-aircraft guns and other fortifications. It is about the size of a football field, large enough to house 3,000 centrifuges, but small and hardened enough to lead U.S. officials to suspect it had a military purpose when they exposed the site publicly in 2009.

The 2015 deal saw Iran agree to limit its enrichment in exchange for sanctions relief. The accord also called for Fordo to be turned into a research-and-development facility.

Under Iran's former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran began 20% enrichment.

Israel warned Tehran was building a bomb.

After the discovery of Fordo, the U.S. worked on so-called "bunker-buster" bombs

designed to strike such facilities. As Israel threatened at one point to bomb Iranian nuclear sites like Fordo, U.S. officials reportedly showed them a video of a bunker-buster bomb destroying a mock-up of Fordo in America's southwestern desert.

Israel, which under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continued to expose Iran's nuclear program, offered no immediate comment Saturday.

As of now, Iran is enriching uranium up to 4.5%, in violation of the accord's limit of 3.67%. Experts say Iran now has enough low-enriched uranium stockpiled for at least two nuclear weapons, if it chose to pursue them. Iran long has maintained its nuclear program is peaceful.

In 2018, Israel produced a trove evidence spirited out of Tehran by spies that disproved Iranian claims.

Iran separately has begun construction on a new site at Fordo, according to satellite photos obtained by *The Associated Press* in December.

Iran's announcement coincides with the anniversary of the U.S. drone striking Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad last year. That attack later saw Iran retaliate by launching a ballistic missile strike injuring dozens of U.S. troops in Iraq. Tehran also shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet that night, killing all 176 people on board.

As the anniversary approached, the U.S. has sent B-52 bombers flying over the region and sent a nuclear-powered submarine into the Persian Gulf.

On Thursday, sailors discovered a limpet mine on a tanker in the Persian Gulf off Iraq near the Iranian border as it prepared to transfer fuel to another tanker owned by a company traded on the New York Stock Exchange. No one has claimed responsibility for the mine, though it comes after a series of similar attacks in 2019 that the U.S. Navy blamed on Iran.

Tehran denied being involved.

In November, an Iranian scientist who founded the country's military nuclear program two decades earlier was killed in an attack Tehran blames on Israel.

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