

Iran to announce it is increasing nuclear enrichment to 5% Sunday

Tehran claims an increase for 'peaceful' purposes, accuses the US and Europe of breaking nuke deal commitment, but more likely to further ratchet up tensions.



A view of the heavy-water production plant in the central Iranian town of Arak, August 26, 2006. (AP/ ISNA, Arash Khamoushi)

Iran will on Sunday announce an increase in uranium enrichment to five percent, in a breach of its commitments to the 2015 nuclear deal, further stoking tensions with Washington and putting more pressure on the European states that support the accord.

"The main announcement tomorrow will be the increase of the level of enrichment to 5% percent from 3.67% that we agreed under the deal," an Iranian official told the Reuters news agency on condition of anonymity.

Ali Akbar Velayati, international affairs adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said earlier that the uranium enrichment "will increase as much as needed for our peaceful activities."

"For Bushehr nuclear reactor we need five percent enrichment and it is a completely peaceful goal," he said in an interview published Friday on the leader's official website.



Iranian presidential candidate Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister, walks past a portrait of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the conclusion of his press conference in Tehran, Iran, Monday, June 3, 2013. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

He also accused the US and European states of violating the Joint Comprehensive

Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear accord is known.

Iran breached a uranium stockpile limit set by the deal last week.

Under the atomic accord, Iran agreed to enrich uranium to no more than 3.67%, which is enough for peaceful pursuits but is far below weapons-grade levels of 90%. However, the closer it gets to 20% the less time it will need to break out to a bomb.

Iran denies it seeks nuclear weapons, but the nuclear deal sought to prevent that as a possibility by limiting enrichment and Iran's stockpile of uranium to 300 kilograms (661 pounds).

Iran said Saturday that it would officially announce the steps cutting its commitments to the 2015 nuclear deal on Sunday morning, the day is set for Europe to offer new terms for the accord after the US withdrew and put punishing economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

Iran's senior nuclear negotiator, Abbas Araqchi, will announce the cuts in a news conference Sunday at 10:30 a.m. local time, the semi-official Fars news agency said.

The UK, France, and Germany have yet to offer a way for Iran to avoid the sweeping economic sanctions imposed by US President Donald Trump since he pulled the United States out of the JCPOA a year ago, especially those targeting its crucial oil sales.

In response to the spiraling tensions and war of words with Iran, the US has rushed thousands of troops, an aircraft carrier, nuclear-capable B-52 bombers and advanced fighter jets to the Mideast. Mysterious oil tanker attacks near the Strait of Hormuz, strikes by Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen on Saudi Arabia, and Iran shooting down a US military drone have raised fears of a wider conflict engulfing the region.



A US military helicopters take part in an air power demonstration next to the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier in the Arabian Sea, July 4, 2019. (US Navy/Jeff Sherman)

On Wednesday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said Tehran would increase its enrichment of uranium to “any amount that we want” beginning Sunday.

On Monday, Iran and United Nations inspectors acknowledged it had broken the stockpile limit. Combining that with increasing its enrichment levels narrows the one-year window experts believe Iran would need to have enough material to build a nuclear weapon if it chose to do so.

The UN’s nuclear watchdog said Friday that it would hold an emergency meeting on Iran’s nuclear program on July 10.

The meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency’s board of governors was announced following a US request.

Iran insists that it is not violating the JCPOA, citing terms of the agreement allowing one side to temporarily abandon some of the commitments if it deems the other side is not respecting its part of the accord.



President Hassan Rouhani speaks in a cabinet meeting in Tehran, Iran, July 3, 2019. (Iranian Presidency Office via AP)

Rouhani stressed that Iran’s breach of the stockpile limit would be reversed if the other parties to the nuclear deal made good on their side of the bargain — relief from sanctions.

Rouhani said Iran will also deliver on its threat to resume construction of a heavy water reactor after July 7 and will bring it to the condition that “according to you, is dangerous and can produce plutonium.”

Trump had warned Monday that Iran is “playing with fire” after Tehran said it had exceeded the limit set on its enriched uranium stockpile.

But Rouhani said it was the US that started the fire and Washington has to “put it out” by returning to the nuclear deal.

Source:

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