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AP News

Iran announces batch of higher enriched uranium

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Iran has succeeded in producing its first significant batch of further enriched uranium, the country's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi said Wednesday, a move defying U.N. demands to halt the controversial program.

The uranium has been enriched from around 3.5 percent to 20 percent purity, needed to fuel a medical research reactor, Salehi said, according to the ISNA news agency. That level is far below the more than 90 percent needed to build a nuclear weapon, but U.S. officials have expressed concern Iran may be moving closer to the ability to reach weapons-grade level.

Washington is accelerating its campaign for a new round of U.N. sanctions against Iran for its refusal to suspend enrichment, as demanded by the United Nations. Salehi's announcement was a further sign of Tehran's determination to push ahead with the program.

Tehran began the further enrichment in February after talks stalled over a U.N.-brokered proposal that the United States hoped would at least temporarily leave Iran unable to produce a warhead. The U.S. and its allies accuse Iran of seeking to build a nuclear weapon, a claim Iran denies.

Under the proposal, Iran was to send 2,420 pounds (1,100 kilograms) of low-enriched uranium abroad, where it would be further enriched to 20 percent and converted into fuel rods, which

would then be returned to Iran for use in the research reactor. Doing so would leave Iran with insufficient low-enriched uranium to further purify to weapons-grade level.

But Iran made counterdemands on the deal that the U.S. and its allies rejected, saying they would thwart the goal of the swap. Among Tehran's proposals were that the swap be simultaneous or that smaller amounts of low-enriched uranium be sent abroad.

Iran says a nuclear fuel swap with the West proposed under the U.N.-drafted plan still is on the table, saying there was tacit agreement on the amount and timing of the exchange but that the two sides need to talk on the venue.

The U.S. is working to gather support at the United Nations for a new round of sanctions against Iran for its refusal to suspend enrichment entirely, as demanded by the United Nation.

Salehi's announcement was a sign Iran was determined to move ahead in the program.

He said so far 11 pounds (5 kilograms) of 20 percent enriched uranium has been produced. He said just over 3 pounds (1.5 kilograms) a month was needed to run the research reactor in Tehran.

On Feb. 11, days after the further enriching began, Iran announced that it had succeeded in producing a few ounces (grams) of the material.

However, Iran must first process the material into fuel rods, and it is not clear if it yet has the know-how to do so. The research reactor produces medical isotopes, including material for treating cancer and other diseases that the government says will go to treating some 850,000 people.