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AFP

Defiant Iran test-fires long-range missiles

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Iran on Monday test-fired long-range missiles it says could reach targets inside Israel, as the defiant Revolutionary Guards staged war games amid tension with the West over Tehran's atomic drive.

The UN nuclear watchdog revealed on Friday that Tehran was building a second uranium enrichment plant, ratcheting up tensions with the West which suspects the Islamic republic wants to acquire atomic weapons, a charge it denies.

Guards' air force commander Hossein Salami said his men test-fired surface-to-surface Sejil and Shahab-3 long-range missiles on the second straight day of the manoeuvres.

"An improved version of Shahab-3 and the two-stage Sejil, powered by solid fuel, were fired," Salami was quoted as saying by state-owned Arabic language Al-Alam television.

The Fars news agency said it was the first time the Sejil had been test-fired during a military exercise.

State-owned English-language Press TV broadcast the first footage of the Sejil, as the light blue missile barrelled skywards trailing thick white smoke.

The channel also showed footage of a Shahab-3 blasting off in a ball of fire from a desert terrain.

Iran says both long-range weapons can travel for 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles), which would put arch-foe Israel, most Arab states and parts of Europe, including much of Turkey, within range.

"These are long-range missiles and can hit any target in the region," Salami said.

On Sunday, the Guards fired several short- and medium-range missiles, some bearing multiple warheads, state media reported.

The medium-range Shahab-1 and Shahab-2, with a range of between 300 kilometres and 700 kilometres, were successfully launched, Salami said. "The missiles shot have precisely hit the targets," he added.

Earlier, the Guards test-fired three types of short-range missiles — the Tondar-69, Fateh-110 and Zelzal. All three solid-fuel weapons have a range of between 100 and 400 kilometres.

On Monday, Salami issued a stern warning to Iran's foes.

"Our response will be strong and destructive to those who threaten the existence, independence, freedom and values of our regime. They will regret it," the official IRNA news agency quoted him as saying.

The manoeuvres raised concern in London and Paris, while a Russian foreign ministry source told Interfax news agency the world should not "succumb to emotions" in dealing with Iran.

"It is obviously reprehensible as such but it mustn't distract us from the big question of this week, which is how will Iran respond at the meeting with the international community on Thursday?" British Foreign Secretary David Miliband told Sky News television.

He was referring to Thursday's high-profile talks between Iran and six world powers over Tehran's atomic programme.

In Paris, the foreign ministry urged Iran to stop such "deeply destabilising activities" and respond "without delay to the demands of the international community to reach a negotiated settlement on the nuclear question."

Germany too criticised the missile tests.

"The news from Iran is troubling.

Tehran is testing missiles despite the fact that it wants to talk with the (six countries) about regional peace and stability. Ahead of the upcoming talks, this is not a signal that will build trust," German foreign ministry spokesman Jens Ploetner said.

The missile exercise comes after US President Barack Obama earlier this month scrapped a plan by his predecessor George W. Bush to deploy missile interceptors in Poland and a tracking radar in the Czech Republic by 2013.

In taking the decision, Obama emphasised the threat of Iran's short-range and medium-range missiles instead of the potential danger from its longer-range weapons.

Iran has in the past threatened to target US bases in the region and to block the strategic Gulf Strait of Hormuz waterway for oil tankers if its nuclear sites are attacked.

Israel, widely believed to be the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear-armed power, and the United States have never ruled out a military option to thwart Iran's nuclear drive.

On Friday, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Iran was building a second uranium enrichment plant, and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed claims by Iranian officials that it has peaceful aims.

“We don’t believe that they can present convincing evidence that it’s only for peaceful purposes, but we are going to put them to the test on October 1,” she said.