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US, EU Launch Joint Carrot-And-Stick Iran Strategy

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States and Europe launched a coordinated push on Friday to get Iran to abandon its suspected nuclear arms program by offering economic incentives as a carrot and possible U.N. action as a stick.

Washington announced it would allow Iran to begin talks on joining the World Trade Organization and would consider allowing it to buy commercial aircraft spare parts, in a major policy shift requested by the Europeans.

In return, Britain, France and Germany said they would haul Tehran before the U.N. Security Council if it resumed uranium enrichment and nuclear reprocessing activities, which could be used to develop an atomic bomb.

In Vienna, Sirus Naseri, a senior Iranian negotiator in nuclear talks with the European Union, dismissed the U.S. offer as "too insignificant to comment about."

The U.S. decision marks a major policy shift by Washington, which had previously refused to offer such incentives to Iran.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cast the U.S. move as a way to support the European diplomacy and ruled out further U.S. gestures to Iran for now.

"This is giving to the Europeans more cards to play in their negotiations with the Iranians," Rice told Reuters. "This is about unifying the international community so that it's the Iranians who are isolated, not the United States."

The joint U.S. -EU strategy was a first fruit of President Bush's trip to Europe last month and appeared to bridge, at least for now, years of disagreement over whether to engage or isolate the Islamic republic.

'SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE'

"We are speaking with one voice with our European friends. I look forward to working with our European friends to make it abundantly clear to the Iranian regime that the free world will not tolerate them having a nuclear weapon," Bush said.

"The Iranians have been put on notice that they're not going to be able to split the allies on this issue, and that's what they're trying to do," Rice said.

The common stand, however, leaves room for disputes down the line. Britain, France and Germany did not commit to supporting U.N. sanctions nor did they set any deadline for their talks with Iran.

In a written statement, Rice said the United States would drop its objection to Iran's application to join the WTO and would "consider, on a case-by-case basis, the licensing of spare parts for Iranian civilian aircraft, in particular

from the European Union to Iran."

U.S. support is vital if Iran is to get either benefit.

Iran's WTO entry, which would tie it far more closely to the world trading system, would require broad reforms of its economy, a development many analysts believe would open up the society and possibly encourage political reform.

But it could be years, if ever, before Iran were to join, given the lengthy negotiations that typically precede membership and uncertainty about whether Tehran will enact reforms, let alone abandon its suspected nuclear ambitions.

While deeply skeptical the European diplomacy will work, U.S. officials have said they want to give it the best chance of success and insulate themselves from blame if it fails.

The United States accuses Iran of secretly trying to develop nuclear arms. Tehran says its program, long concealed from the U.N. nuclear watchdog, is purely for civilian energy purposes.

But chief Iranian negotiator Hassan Rohani insisted in an interview published on Friday that Iran would not give in to Western demands that it scrap efforts to complete the fuel cycle, which could help it make bombs.

'NO CHOICE'

France, Germany and Britain said that if Iran continued its suspension of all enrichment and reprocessing activities and cooperated fully with the U.N.'s Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, they believed the issue could be resolved at that level.

"If on the other hand, despite our efforts Iran does not do so ... we shall have no choice but to support referring Iran's nuclear program to the U.N. Security Council," the three told their EU colleagues in a letter.

Iran threatened last week to resume uranium enrichment and scrap the talks if it was taken to the Security Council, an attitude Western diplomats said appeared to be a bluff to assuage intense national pride on the nuclear issue. (Additional reporting by Paul Taylor in Brussels and Louis Charbonneau in Vienna)

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