

Western powers reopen Iran nuclear talks

James Blitz in Vienna

Iran began fresh talks with world powers on Monday on the future of its nuclear programme amid western hopes that Tehran will agree a deal that significantly reduces its current stock of low enriched uranium (LEU).

In a new attempt to resolve the stand-off over Iran's programme, the US, France and Russia sent high-level government figures to Vienna for talks which, if successful, could help avert fresh international sanctions from being imposed next year.

At the end of the first day, Mohamed ElBaradei, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said the talks had started positively.

"We're off to good start. We've had a constructive meeting. Most technical issues have been discussed," he told reporters.

Early signs, however, indicated that Iran may disappoint US and European hopes that a ground-breaking deal will be reached on Tuesday after it chose to be represented at the talks by a low-ranking figure.

The US is represented at the talks by Daniel Poneman, the deputy energy secretary in the Obama administration. Iran, however, has chosen to send no senior figure from Tehran and is instead represented only by its ambassador to the IAEA.

The talks also faced being clouded by Iranian allegations that the US and Britain backed militants who killed 42 people, including six senior Revolutionary Guards commanders, in a suicide bombing on Sunday.

Iranian authorities have blamed the UK and US for funding the group, known as Jundallah, which Tehran has held responsible for the attack in the restive province of Sistan-Baluchestan.

Earlier this month Iran agreed "in principle" to a proposal under which some 1,200kg of its current stock of LEU would be transferred to France and Russia, where it would be converted into fuel that can provide medical isotopes that provide cancer cures.

A senior European diplomat told the Financial Times on Monday that if Iran were to give the green light to such a move this week, it would significantly improve the confidence of western powers that it is serious about negotiations on its nuclear programme.

By reducing its current stock of LEU in this way, Iran would have far less fuel stock to convert into weapons-grade uranium, if it so wished.

France and the UK are insisting that all 1,250kg of LEU must be shipped out of the country by the end of the year if the deal is to confirm the kind of guarantees the international community is seeking.

However, Iran may look for the LEU to be transferred more gradually, a position that could undermine a deal.

Financial Times, London, Oct. 19th 2009, World, online.