

IRAN SAYS IT HAS STARTED ENRICHING URANIUM TO 60%

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

A bank of centrifuges seen at Natanz nuclear site. File photo

Iran began enriching uranium on Friday to its highest level ever, edging closer to weapons-grade levels to pressure talks in Vienna aimed at restoring its nuclear deal with world powers after an attack on its main atomic site.

A top official said only a few grams an hour of uranium gas would be enriched up to 60% purity — triple the level it once did but at a rate far slower than what Tehran could produce.

International inspectors already said Iran planned to do so above-ground at its Natanz nuclear site, not deep within its underground halls hardened to withstand airstrikes.

The move is likely to raise tensions even as Iran negotiates in Vienna over a way to allow the U.S. back into the agreement and lift the crushing economic sanctions it faces. However, its scope also provides Iran with a way to quickly de-escalate if it chose.

The announcement also marks a significant escalation after the attack that damaged centrifuges at Natanz, an attack this past weekend suspected of having been carried out by Israel. While Israel has yet to claim it, it comes amid a long-running shadow war between the two West Asian rivals.

‘Any level possible’

Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, Iran’s Parliament Speaker, announced the move in a Twitter post later acknowledged by Iranian state television.

“The young and God-believing Iranian scientists managed to achieve a 60 per cent enriched uranium product,” Mr. Qalibaf said.

The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, the country’s civilian nuclear arm, later acknowledged the move. Ali Akbar Salehi said the centrifuges now produce 9 grams an hour, but that would drop to 5 grams an hour in the coming days.

“Now, any enrichment (level) is possible if we decide it,” Mr. Salehi said.

While 60% is higher than any level Iran previously enriched uranium, it is still lower than weapons-grade levels of 90%. Iran had been enriching up to 20%— even that was a short technical step to weapons grade. The deal limited Iran’s enrichment to 3.67%.

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