

IRAN RESUMES URANIUM ENRICHMENT AT FORDOW PLANT

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

Deal in danger: Centrifuge machines in Natanz uranium enrichment facility, Iran, in a photo released on Tuesday. AP

Iran resumed uranium enrichment at its underground Fordow plant south of Tehran on Thursday in a new step back from its commitments under a landmark 2015 nuclear deal, raising alarm from Western powers. Engineers began feeding uranium hexafluoride gas into the plant's mothballed enrichment centrifuges in "the first minutes of Thursday", the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation said.

The suspension of uranium enrichment at the long-secret plant was one of the restrictions on its nuclear programme Iran had agreed to in return for the lifting of sanctions. Iran's announcement that it would resume enrichment at the Fordow plant from midnight (2030 GMT on Wednesday) had drawn a chorus of concern from the remaining parties to the troubled agreement.

The resumption of enrichment at Fordow is Iran's fourth step away from the agreement. The United States called for "serious steps" to be taken in response to the move. "Iran's expansion of proliferation-sensitive activities raises concerns that Iran is positioning itself to have the option of a rapid nuclear breakout," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

Uranium enrichment is the sensitive process that produces fuel for nuclear power plants but also, in highly enriched form, the fissile core for a warhead.

Iran is now enriching uranium to 4.5%, exceeding the 3.67% limit set by the 2015 deal but less than the 20% level it had previously operated to and far less than the 90% level required for a warhead. Iran has always denied any military dimension to its nuclear programme.

IAEA inspection

It has been at pains to emphasise that all of the steps it has taken are transparent and swiftly reversible if the remaining parties to the agreement find a way to get round U.S. sanctions.

"All these activities have been carried out under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency," the Iranian nuclear organisation said.

A source close to the United Nations watchdog said that it has inspectors on the ground in Fordow and would report "very rapidly" on the steps taken by Iran.

Iran revealed on Thursday that it had withdrawn the credentials of one IAEA inspector last week after she triggered an alarm at the gate to Iran's other enrichment plant at Natanz, raising suspicion she was carrying a "suspect product". It did not specify what the product was or whether it had actually been found in the inspector's possession. But it promised that its representative to the IAEA would deliver a detailed report on the incident at a special meeting on Iran held at the agency's headquarters in Vienna.

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