

Iran referred to security council as nuclear row flares

Call for sanctions could follow US-led move · Russia and China agree to limited resolution

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The smouldering international confrontation over Iran's nuclear programme flared into life last night after Russia and China agreed to back a US-led move to refer Tehran to the UN security council, a process that could lead to the imposition of punitive sanctions and a sharp escalation of the crisis.

Foreign ministers of the five permanent members of the security council -the US, Britain, France, Russia and China - plus Germany agreed to the referral at a meeting in Paris ahead of this weekend's Group of Eight summit in St Petersburg.

"We have no choice but to return to the security council and continue the process suspended two months ago," said Philippe Douste-Blazy, the French foreign minister. "The Iranians have given no indication at all that they are prepared to engage seriously on the substance of our proposals."

The decision by the group of countries, known as the P5+1, followed inconclusive talks in Brussels on Tuesday between Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy tsar, and Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator and chairman of the country's supreme national security council.

At the meeting Mr Larijani reiterated Iran's previously stated position that it would not offer a formal response to a package of incentives proffered by the west until it was ready, and possibly not before August 22. Western countries had demanded an answer before the G8 summit, which is now likely to be dominated by the two nuclear-related disputes with Iran and North Korea.

"We should have more time, be patient, and try to negotiate," Mr Larijani said after the Solana meeting. He added that Iran was still seeking clarifications and guarantees concerning some of the west's proposals, and that its response would be formulated only after three parliamentary committees in Tehran had completed their assessment.

The western package, which is understood to include technological and economic incentives, is dependent on Iran agreeing to suspend all its uranium enrichment activities indefinitely. The US and other countries believe Iran is pursuing enrichment in order to gain the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons. Tehran flatly denies the charge, saying it wants nuclear technology solely for civil power generation purposes.

Iranian officials have warned in the past that referral to the security council could lead to a complete breakdown in talks with the west, a refusal of further cooperation with the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency, and even Iran's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Russia and China are opposed to the imposition of sanctions, saying such action may only exacerbate the situation. While their objections still stand, they appeared to have agreed at the Paris meeting to allow an initial UN resolution requiring Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. If Iran does not comply further measures, including sanctions or other punishment, will have to be the subject of a separate, possibly more contentious resolution.

Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, said before the Paris meeting that Iran's response to the western package had been "disappointing and incomplete" and that the US was not prepared to wait any longer.

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