**Iran says to start work on new enrichment plant**

By Ramin Mostafavi

April 19, 2010

Yahoo News

Original Source:

*http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20100419/wl\_nm/us\_iran\_nuclear\_sites\_4*

TEHRAN (Reuters) – Iran will start work on a new uranium enrichment nuclear plant, a senior official said on Monday, part of a big expansion of its nuclear programme which has contributed to fears in the West it aims to build a bomb.

Defying Western pressure to curb its sensitive nuclear work, Iran announced in November it planned to expand its enrichment activities by building 10 new sites. The announcement was condemned by the United States and its European allies.

"The president has confirmed the designated location of a new nuclear site and on his order the building process will begin," Mojtaba Samareh-Hashemi, a senior adviser to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, told the semi-official ILNA news agency.

"New locations on which the plants should be constructed this year have been determined and the construction will start stage by stage," Samareh-Hashemi was quoted as saying.

Iran's top nuclear official Akbar Salehi told Reuters in February that Iran would start construction of two enrichment sites by March 2011.

The U.N. nuclear watchdog has been seeking information from Iran about its vow to build 10 sites, a plan which analysts believe may be largely bluster for now as it would take many years if not decades to execute.

Iran has not notified the International Atomic Energy Agency about the new site, a diplomat close to the Vienna-based body said. Under IAEA rules, countries are obliged to notify the agency as soon as they decide to build a nuclear facility.

Failure to notify the IAEA would not automatically mean the agency would take any action; member states would have to vote on whether action should be taken.

Iran has said it will only alert the agency of a new plant six months before nuclear materials are to be brought into it.

SANCTIONS, HIGHER ENRICHMENT

Washington is pushing for a fourth round of United Nations sanctions on Iran in the coming weeks to pressure it to halt its enrichment-related work, which Tehran says is entirely peaceful.

Iran started higher-level enrichment in February, saying it needed the 20 percent enriched fuel for a research reactor in Tehran making medical isotopes. Such potent material is not necessary to generate electricity.

Western officials fear Iran's move to escalate enrichment is ultimately meant to advance it on the road to generating weapons-grade uranium -- enriched to 90 percent purity.

Tehran has said it is still willing to swap low-level enriched uranium for higher-grade fuel enriched abroad -- a move which would help address fears about Iran's enrichment activities -- but the exchange must happen on Iranian soil.

The West believed it had persuaded Iran, at talks in Geneva last October, to hand over some of its uranium stocks to be enriched abroad, but that deal fell apart soon afterwards.

Samareh-Hashemi said any import of enriched uranium would not mean Iran planned to stop its own enrichment.

"The domestic production of (nuclear) fuel does not contradict importing it," he said.

"We have started to produce uranium domestically based on our need to provide fuel for the Tehran research reactor and this will continue until our needs are met."

In a separate development, state-owned Jam-e-Jam daily said Iran's ambassador to the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, would soon be stepping down as his term was coming to an end. Soltanieh was not immediately available to comment.

(Additional reporting by Sylvia Westall in Vienna; Writing by Robin Pomeroy; Editing by Jon Hemming)