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Iran's secret plans for 'nuclear' gas go ahead despite earlier promises

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Teheran had assured European leaders that it would suspend uranium enrichment activities, but new information suggests otherwise

Iran has drawn up secret plans to make large quantities of a gas that can be used to produce highly enriched uranium, despite [promises to suspend enrichment activities](#).

Gholam Reza Aghazadeh, Iran's atomic energy chief, has authorised construction of a plant to make Anhydrous Hydrogen Fluoride (AHF), a gas that has many uses, from petrochemical processing to uranium enrichment.

The plant is expected to be finished by 2006 and will have a capacity to produce 5,000 tons of AHF a year, according to a Western intelligence official.

It is to be built near Isfahan, a city where the authorities are said to have authorised a number of secret nuclear facilities.



Technicians work in the Isfahan nuclear facility south of Tehran

"Such a plant would directly enhance enrichment activity," said one Western diplomat based in Vienna. "Iran has a deal with us, but it is pushing the envelope in every way it can."

"It shows that in their mind they have not accepted suspension. Politically, on the domestic stage, the officials in charge have to show that enrichment is still going forward."

Iran's nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rohani, met Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, and his European counterparts in Brussels last week, and offered renewed assurances that Iran had suspended all declared enrichment activity.

Construction of an AHF facility would not itself violate Iran's agreement with Britain, France and Germany that was hammered out over several days of negotiations at the International Atomic Energy Agency's headquarters in Vienna.

The gas is not listed as a controlled nuclear technology, but it can be used during the process of turning uranium tetrafluoride into uranium hexafluoride, used in atom bombs.

America has previously blocked Iranian efforts to acquire AHF.

Four years ago, Washington put enormous pressure on Beijing to withdraw a shipment of large quantities of the gas to Iran.

According to a report by the Centre for Nonproliferation Studies, in California, China may have sold a blueprint for a facility to produce highly enriched uranium to Iran as part of the same deal. Isfahan is one of the main centres of Iran's alleged programme to develop nuclear weapons.

The German magazine, Der Spiegel, alleged last month that Iranian officials had ordered a tunnel to be constructed to house a secret operation to produce uranium hexafluoride.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the IAEA, said last week that Iran was one of the countries with nuclear expertise that were close to possessing a nuclear deterrent. He said: "The fundamental issue is that countries look at knowhow as a deterrent. Once you get into areas of deterrence, you get into the area of security and insecurity. If you have the nuclear material the weapon part is not far away."

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