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Iran 'reaches nuclear target'

- Story Highlights
- Iran says it has met its nuclear goal of 3,000 centrifuges to enrich uranium
- However Iran's claim has not been independently verified
- The U.N. has threatened sanctions if the country does not stop its program

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) -- Iran has reached its long-sought goal of running 3,000 centrifuges to enrich uranium for its nuclear program, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced Sunday in a report on state media.

The U.N. Security Council had threatened a third round of sanctions against the country if it did not freeze the uranium enrichment program -- which Iran maintains is for peaceful energy purposes, but the U.S. says is to hide a weapons program.

"The West thought the Iranian nation would give in after just a resolution, but now we have taken another step in the nuclear progress and launched more than 3,000 centrifuge machines, installing a new cascade every week," the state television Web site quoted Ahmadinejad as saying.

Still, Ahmadinejad's comments seemed at odds with independent assessments of the status of his country's enrichment program.

As recently as Thursday, a report drawn up by International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei, put the number of centrifuges enriching uranium at closer to 2,000 at its vast underground hall at Natanz.

The 2,000 figure is an increase of a few hundred of the machines over May, when the IAEA last reported on Iran. Still the rate of expansion is much slower than a few months ago, when Tehran was assembling close to 200 centrifuges every two weeks.

As well, Iran continued to produce only negligible amounts of nuclear fuel with its centrifuges, far below the level usable for nuclear warheads, the report said.

"They have the knowledge to proceed much more quickly," said a U.N. official.

While Iran has denied stalling, the official and others suggested it could have decided to proceed at a slower pace as it increases its cooperation with agency investigators looking at past suspicious activities so as to reduce any sentiment to impose new U.N. sanctions.

Former U.N. nuclear inspector David Albright and Jacqueline Shire of the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security said the slowdown could be a combination of both "technical difficulties" and "political considerations."

"Iran likely has managed to learn how to operate individual centrifuges and cascades adequately. However, it still may be struggling to operate a large number of cascades at the same time in parallel," they wrote in a report e-mailed to The Associated Press.

"In addition, Iran's leadership may have decided to slow work to overcome technical problems in order to forestall negative reactions that would lend support for further sanctions by the UN Security Council."

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