

Rosatom Will Start Up Iran's Bushehr Plant

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Putin, left, meeting Iran's leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran in 2007. **Hasan Sarbakhshian**

Rosatom said it would begin loading nuclear fuel into the reactor of Iran's first atomic power station this week, an irreversible step marking the startup of the Bushehr plant after nearly 40 years of delays.

Russian and Iranian specialists are to begin loading uranium-packed fuel rods into the reactor on Saturday, a process that will take two to three weeks.

"This will be an irreversible step," said Sergei Novikov, a spokesman for Rosatom, Russia's state nuclear corporation.

"At that moment, the Bushehr nuclear power plant will be certified as a nuclear energy installation," he said by telephone Friday.

"That means the period of testing is over and the period of the physical startup has begun, but this period takes about two and a half months," he said, adding that the first fissile reaction

would take place in early October.

Russia agreed in 1995 to build the Bushehr plant on the site of a project begun in the 1970s by German company Siemens, but delays have haunted the \$1 billion project, and diplomats say Moscow has used it as a lever in relations with Tehran.

The United States has criticized Moscow for pushing ahead with the Bushehr project at a time when major powers, including Russia, are pressing Tehran to allay fears that its nuclear power program might be geared to develop weapons.

But Western fears that the Bushehr project could help Iran develop a nuclear weapon were lessened when Moscow reached an agreement with Tehran obliging it to return spent fuel to Russia. Weapons-grade plutonium can be derived from spent fuel rods.

The U.S. State Department said it did not regard Bushehr as a proliferation risk, but emphasized that broader concerns remained about the direction of Iran's nuclear program.

"Russia's support for Bushehr underscores that Iran does not need an indigenous enrichment capability if its intentions are purely peaceful," State Department spokesman Mark Toner said in Washington.

Toner said in a statement that the Russian fuel deal for Bushehr mirrored a broader fuel swap proposal that Western powers have offered Iran in hopes of halting its domestic enrichment program.

The head of Iran's nuclear power agency, Ali Akbar Salehi, said a ceremony inaugurating the plant would be held in late September or early October, when the fuel is moved "to the heart of the reactor."

The reactor will be linked to Iran's electricity grid about six weeks later when it is powered up to a level of 50 percent, Salehi told the semi-official Mehr news agency.

Diplomats say the Bushehr plant, monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear watchdog, poses little proliferation risk and has no link with Iran's secretive uranium enrichment program, seen as the main "weaponization" threat, at other installations.

The State Department, noting "the world's fundamental concerns with Iran's overall nuclear intentions," said it was important to remember that Iran remained in serious violation of its broader obligations to the IAEA.

The United States sees the opening of the Bushehr plant as a false signal to Tehran as Washington strives to isolate Iran politically and economically to force it to compromise on enrichment.

A senior diplomat from an IAEA member nation said Friday that the Americans had "raised those concerns with the Russians" in recent weeks. The diplomat, who is familiar with the issue, spoke on condition of anonymity because his information was confidential.

Russia started the delivery of nuclear fuel to the Bushehr plant in late 2007, and deliveries

were completed in 2008.

Moscow and Washington agree that importing fuel makes unnecessary Iran's own enrichment project — the main focus of Western concerns that Tehran is trying to make a nuclear bomb.

Iran, the world's fourth-largest crude oil producer, rejects such allegations and says its nuclear program is aimed only at generating electricity or producing isotopes for medical care.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said March 18 that Russia planned to start up the reactor at the Bushehr plant in the summer of 2010.

(Reuters, AP)

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