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Shmatko Hopes for Tehran Oil

By The Moscow Times

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Russia hopes for further talks about the development of an Iranian oil field after Iran ousted Gazprom Neft from the project, Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko said Thursday.

"We count on discussing this with our Iranian colleagues in the near future," he told reporters after a Presidium meeting, Interfax reported.

The National Iranian Oil Company said earlier this week that it abandoned the plan to develop the Azar field jointly with Gazprom Neft, saying the Russian company showed a lack of interest. On Tuesday, the Iranian state oil company signed a $1.9 billion deal for Azar with a consortium of Iranian firms that will replace Gazprom Neft.

Iran's displeasure with Gazprom Neft first came to light in August. Shmatko said Thursday that during a recent trip to Tehran the countries agreed to consider replacing Gazprom Neft with another Russian company.

State-owned Zarubezhneft signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation with Iran

in the summer.

At the Presidium, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin urged regional governments to save most additional revenues this year in the event that the economy slows next year.

He also announced that the number of unemployed declined 1.2 million people, to 4.6 million people by the end of September since the start of the year. The jobless rate has now dropped below the level where it was before the economic crisis hit in late 2008, Putin said.

Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Zhukov said the current unemployment rate is 6 percent.

In other statements, Putin said the government would not revise price caps on electricity for households and domestic natural gas sales next year. The decision aims to tame increases in utility bills, he said.

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