

U.S. claims Iran is preparing for nuclear breakout



Washington, November 7 (RHC)-- The United States has accused Iran of preparing "a rapid nuclear breakout" after it began pumping uranium gas into hundreds of centrifuges, another step that Washington claims violates the landmark 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made the comments on Thursday, after Iran stepped up activity at its underground Fordow nuclear plant. He warned against what he called Tehran's "violence and terror" and urged the international community to take immediate action.

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) confirmed the latest nuclear programme step after 2,000kg (4,400 pounds) of uranium hexafluoride was transferred from the Natanz nuclear facility to Fordow. Iran previously announced that 1,044 centrifuges were installed at the well-protected facility.

The nuclear pact bans the production of nuclear material at Fordow, a highly-sensitive site that Iran hid from UN non-proliferation inspectors until its exposure in 2009. But with feedstock gas entering its centrifuges, the facility - built inside a mountain to withstand any air raids - moves from the permitted status of a research plant to being an active nuclear site.

"After all successful preparations ... injection of uranium gas into centrifuges started on Thursday at Fordow... The whole the process has been supervised by the inspectors of the UN nuclear watchdog,"

AEOI said in a statement.

Iran insists the latest move was not a violation of the nuclear deal. Tehran has gradually scaled back its commitments to the agreement, under which it restrained its enrichment programme in exchange for the removal of most international sanctions since the US reneged on the deal last year.

Enrichment of uranium to such a low level of fissile purity would be broadly suitable for civilian electricity generation. Ninety-percent purity is required for nuclear weapon fuel.

Iran's move at Fordow will make it even harder for the deal's other parties to prevent its ultimate collapse. The decision to inject uranium gas into centrifuges at Fordow was described by Russia as extremely alarming.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed concern about Tehran's announcements but said European powers should do their part. "They are demanding that Iran fulfil all [obligations] without exception, but are not giving anything in return," he told reporters. The Kremlin has previously called punishing sanctions against Iran "unprecedented and illegal."

The new nuclear activity was the fourth step announced by Iran since it began responding to Washington's abandonment of the nuclear deal. French President Emmanuel Macron called Iran's latest move "grave," saying it explicitly signalled Iran's intent for the first time to leave the deal - formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"I think that for the first time, Iran has decided in an explicit and blunt manner to leave the JCPOA, which marks a profound shift," said Macron, who has been at the forefront of efforts by European signatories to salvage the deal after the U.S. withdrew.

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