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The Hague, February 3 (RHC)-- The United Nations' highest court has ruled that it can hear a case brought by Iran against the United States in a bid to end sanctions the Trump administration reimposed in 2018 after pulling out of an international deal aimed at curtailing Tehran's nuclear program.

A majority of a panel of 16 judges on Wednesday found that the International Court of Justice (ICJ), also known as the world court, has jurisdiction in the dispute. Lawyers for the US argued at hearings last year that the case should be thrown out by the ICJ for lack of jurisdiction and admissibility but the court's president, Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf, said that judges rejected US arguments that Iran could not base claims at the ICJ on a 1955 bilateral friendship pact.

Judges found the treaty, signed decades before Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution and the sharp deterioration of ties with the U.S., could be used as a basis for the court's jurisdiction. "The court unanimously rejects the preliminary objections to its jurisdiction raised by the United States of America according to which the subject matter of the dispute does not relate to the interpretation or application of the Treaty of Amity," Yusuf said.

Other U.S. objections to the case were also dismissed, meaning Iran's claim will now move on to a hearing on its merits. A final decision is likely to take several years.

Iran brought the case in 2018 after then-President Donald Trump's administration imposed sanctions following his decision to abandon a 2015 pact under which Iran accepted curbs to its nuclear program.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif referred to Wednesday's decision as another legal victory for Iran. "Iran has always fully respected international law. High time for the US to live up to its international obligations," he wrote.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman, Saeed Khatibzadeh, said: "Using international legal mechanisms is part of the Islamic Republic of Iran's government and foreign ministry in securing the rights of Iran's honorable people on the international scene."

The ruling comes as new U.S. President Joe Biden is seeking to enhance diplomacy towards Iran while Washington looks at restoring constraints on the country's nuclear programme and reining in its regional ambitions.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken appointed a new special envoy for Iran on Friday as Biden's national security adviser said that restoring limits on the Iranian nuclear programme is a top administration priority.

The ICJ's rulings are binding, but it has no power to enforce them. The United States claims the International Court of Justice has no legal jurisdiction and will not accept any decision by the UN court.

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