

France's Sarkozy vows strong nuclear arms policy

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By Matthias Blamont

CHERBOURG, France (Reuters) – French President Nicolas Sarkozy pledged on Friday to maintain a strong nuclear weapons program in order to defend his country against threats such as the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Speaking at the launch of France's fourth nuclear-armed submarine, the "Terrible" (Fearsome), Sarkozy said his nation had to face new security threats, including Iran, and needed to be able to strike back forcefully if attacked.

"Everyone must be aware today that even far-flung powers' nuclear missiles can reach Europe in less than half an hour," Sarkozy said in a speech at the northern port of Cherbourg.

While only major powers had such means today, countries in Asia and the Middle East were conducting a "forced march" to acquire such ballistic missile capabilities, he added.

"I am thinking in particular of Iran. Iran is increasing the range of its missiles while grave suspicions hang over its nuclear program. Europe's security is at stake," he said.

The U.N. Security Council has passed three rounds of sanctions against Iran for failing to allay fears that it is trying to develop nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian power program.

Iran denies the charges, saying it only wants to make electricity. It also continues to expand its long-range missile program, and says it can hit targets 2,000 km away, heightening concern in the West.

"In the face of proliferation, the international community must be united, the international community must be resolute. Because we want peace, we must be without weakness with those who violate international norms," Sarkozy said in a thinly veiled reference to the Islamic republic.

"Maintaining the competences necessary to dissuasion at the highest level is a fundamental objective for our security," he said, adding: "All those who threaten to attack our vital interests would expose themselves to a severe riposte by France."

Sarkozy proposed measures to limit nuclear stockpiles and put an end to weapons testing

after his predecessor Jacques Chirac sparked international outrage by testing arms in the south Pacific shortly after his 1995 election.

France has since signed and ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and he called on all other countries to do the same, including nuclear powers the United States and China.

"I propose to launch without delay negotiations for a treaty banning the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons and to impose an immediate moratorium on the production of these materials," Sarkozy said.

He also proposed immediate talks on a treaty banning short- and medium-range ground-to-ground missiles, a category which includes Scud-type missiles.

(Writing by Francois Murphy; Editing by Charles Dick)

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