

Russia's foreign minister strongly warns against use of force on Iran

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Russia's foreign minister strongly warns against use of force on Iran

By Vladimir Isachenkov

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MOSCOW – Russia's foreign minister on Friday warned against the use of force on Iran, saying there is no proof it is trying to build nuclear weapons.

Sergey Lavrov said Iran should be engaged in dialogue and encouraged to cooperate with the U.N. nuclear monitoring agency.

Lavrov made the statement when asked to comment on an Israeli Cabinet member's statement earlier this month that Israel could attack Iran if it does not halt its nuclear program.

"I hope the actual actions would be based on international law," Lavrov said. "And international law clearly protects Iran's and anyone else's territorial integrity."

Israel's military refused to confirm or deny a report Friday that its warplanes staged a major rehearsal this month for a possible attack on Iran.

The New York Times report quoted U.S. officials as saying more than 100 Israeli F-16s and F-15s staged the maneuver over the eastern Mediterranean and Greece in the first week of June. It said the aircraft flew more than 900 miles (1,450 kilometers), roughly the distance from Israel to Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment facility, and that the exercise included refueling tankers and helicopters capable of rescuing downed pilots.

Lavrov said Russia had asked both the United States and Israel to provide factual information to back their claims that Iran was working to build atomic weapons. "So far we have seen none, and the same conclusion was made by the International Atomic Energy Agency," he said.

"It's absolutely not right to speak matter-of-factly that Iran continues building nuclear weapons," Lavrov added.

Iran insists its enrichment program is meant only to generate electricity. But because of its

past clandestine activities, including some that could have applications for weapons research, the international community is concerned that Tehran wants to enrich uranium to a purity suitable for use in atomic bombs.

The IAEA suggested in a report to the U.N. Security Council last month that Iran was stonewalling investigators and possibly withholding information crucial to determining whether it conducted research on nuclear weapons.

Lavrov insisted that Iran must be encouraged to continue its cooperation with the U.N. monitoring agency.

"As long as the IAEA reports to us progress in its relations with Iran, as long as Iran closes the issues which were of concern to the IAEA and this process continues, we should avoid any steps which could undermine this very important process," he said, speaking in English.

Russia has maintained close ties with Iran and is building its first nuclear power plant in the southern port of Bushehr, which is expected to go on line later this year. It has backed limited U.N. sanctions aimed at forcing Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment program, but has opposed the U.S. push for harsher measures.

"The key to resolving the Iranian issue is involvement," Lavrov said. "We must involve Iran, engage Iran in resolving the Iranian nuclear program, ... but also engage Iran in constructive, respectful, serious dialogue on Iraq and Afghanistan, on the Middle East in general."

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