

UN poised to pass Iran sanctions despite threat

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- Ahmadinejad warns of immediate retaliation
- US and Britain step up naval presence in Gulf

Ewen MacAskill and Richard Norton-Taylor
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The United Nations security council is finally expected to pass a resolution today to impose international sanctions on Iran for the first time since the 1979 revolution, a punitive move that will heighten diplomatic tensions and risks a military confrontation in the Gulf.

Iran has threatened immediate retaliation, even though the proposed sanctions have been significantly watered down this week. Tehran's options include withdrawal from the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN nuclear watchdog, which would mean Iran would conduct its nuclear programme free from international monitoring, and possible closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the channel for 20% of the world's oil supplies.

Western diplomats think that the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and his colleagues are bluffing but, just in case, the US announced this week it is reinforcing its fleet in the Gulf.

The British government is also increasing its naval presence. Two minehunters arrived in Bahrain on Tuesday but the Ministry of Defence said their deployment was mainly for training with Gulf states and "not to counter any increased threat". Tony Blair, on a visit to the Middle East this week, portrayed Iran as a major threat.

The resolution will impose extremely limited restrictions on international travel on Iranians associated with the nuclear programme, a freeze on their overseas assets and a ban on nuclear-related exports. Western officials yesterday predicted that a draft resolution would be voted on today in New York, bringing to an end six months of negotiations.

Ali Larijani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, who is responsible for nuclear negotiations, was quoted by an Iranian news agency yesterday as saying that Iran would not be deflected by the sanctions. "The nature of this resolution is not capable of pressuring Iran, and Iran will give an appropriate response to it," Mr Larijani said, adding: "This behaviour will just create more problems." He said that Iran would review its cooperation with the IAEA and look at other political, economic and cultural options.

Closure of the Strait of Hormuz would push up oil prices and increase chances of a military

clash, but the Iranians might decide such an option is too dangerous. Mr Ahmadinejad was also dismissive about the impact of sanctions. "America and some European countries know well that they are incapable of doing anything against the Iranian nation," he said.

The security council has been deadlocked over an Iran resolution since it was first proposed before the summer. The US has been seeking tough measures while Russia and China, both of which have close economic ties with Iran, have been arguing in favour of the weakest possible measures. Britain and France have been occupying the middle ground, trying to achieve a consensus, and are the co-authors of the resolution.

Diplomats said yesterday that Washington was unhappy with the outcome, feeling the Europeans had conceded too much ground to Russia, which squeezed compromises out of London and Paris on Wednesday. Instead of an outright travel ban on senior Iranians working at nuclear plants, Russia secured a compromise in which each country would retain discretion over who should be banned.

Items to be banned include all that relate to uranium-enrichment, which is a step on the way to achieving a nuclear weapons capability, or ballistic missiles. Again, Russia obtained a compromise leaving this to the discretion of each country, though exports will have to be reported to the UN sanctions committee. Funds and financial assets owned overseas by organisations working on the nuclear programme are to be frozen.

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