

US threatens sanctions on Iran, Naval Armada enters Gulf

War Games in Persian Gulf

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The United States threatened new UN sanctions to punish Iran's nuclear drive as it ratcheted up tensions with the biggest display of naval power in the Gulf in years.

A bristling US armada led by two aircraft carriers steamed into waters near Iran for exercises Wednesday, hours before UN watchdogs said that Iran was expanding its uranium enrichment program in defiance of international sanctions.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that Iran continues to enrich uranium, which can provide fuel for civilian reactors but also make nuclear bombs.

That prompted warnings from US officials of further UN punishment unless Iran curtails its nuclear development, which the Islamic republic insists is devoted to civilian energy.

"Iran is once again thumbing its nose at the international community," US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said, even as US and Iranian envoys prepared for historic talks on Iraqi security in Baghdad next Monday.

Iran denied obstructing IAEA inspections, but White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe said that the report by the UN atomic watchdog was damning.

The IAEA assessment "is a laundry list of Iran's continued defiance of the international community and shows that Iran's leaders are only furthering the isolation of the Iranian people," he said.

The US Navy said that the Gulf exercises were not directed at Iran but Mustafa Alani, senior analyst with the UAE-based Gulf Research Center, said that it was no coincidence that the powerful flotilla arrived on the day of the IAEA report.

"The aim of this step, which coincides entirely with the end of the UN deadline [to suspend enrichment], is to send a clear message to Iran that a military option is available to Washington," Alani said.

The carriers USS John Stennis and USS Nimitz sailed through the Strait of Hormuz into the Gulf along with a helicopter carrier and amphibious assault ships carrying an estimated 2,200 marines.

"We do maritime security operations here to reassure friends in the region of our

commitment, and certainly this is a viable commitment and a visible one that helps security and stability in the waters here,” said Commander Kevin Aandahl, a spokesman for the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. “From an historic point of view we haven’t done this type of operation with this number of ships in a couple of years at least,” Aandahl said. “I guess what’s significant here is them all coming at the same time.”

In January, Washington said that it planned to keep two carrier battle groups in the Gulf for months – the first such deployment since 2003.

Alani said that a sudden, unexpected outbreak of hostilities between the United States and Iran could be triggered by events in Iraq.

Ahead of Monday’s talks, the United States said that Iran was escalating a proxy war against US forces in Iraq as the two nations sparred verbally over a number of their nationals being detained by each other.

Iran has repeatedly demanded that the United States release five Iranians arrested by US forces in Iraq, while Washington has expressed outrage over the detentions of at least four Iranian-Americans in recent weeks.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch accused Tehran of “holding Iranian-Americans as pawns in its crackdown on local Iranian civil society” and said “intelligence agents are trying to force [them] to make false confessions.”

From Baghdad, US military spokesman Major General William Caldwell told CNN that there was “very credible intelligence” that Shiite-majority Iran was funding Sunni extremists in Iraq, including for roadside bombings against US troops.

Three days after the Baghdad meeting, at the behest of the UN Security Council’s five permanent members plus Germany, European Union foreign envoy Javier Solana is to hold talks with Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani.

Burns said that Solana would renew a year-old offer from the powerful nations for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment in return for cooperation on nuclear energy.

“Should it turn down the offer again, I would think what you’d see is a strong drive” by the six powers “for a third sanctions resolution,” he said.

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