**Iran seeks end to sanctions threat**

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Iran is trying to persuade European governments to give up the pursuit of a third round of United Nations sanctions and allow it the opportunity to prove that its nuclear programme is not designed for weapons production.

Saeid Jalili, deputy foreign minister, toured European capitals last week to market the Islamic Republic’s recent agreement with the UN’s nuclear watchdog, in which Tehran pledged new transparency to clear up nuclear suspicions.

In an interview with the Financial Times, Mr Jalili insisted that the agreement last month with the International Atomic Energy Agency was “another step to indicate Iran’s goodwill”. He said Iran was not seeking to buy time, nor did it intend to draw out implementation.

The “work plan” signed with the IAEA has complicated the pursuit by the US and the European Union of a new UN resolution to tighten sanctions on Iran. The plan will be closely scrutinised this week at a meeting of the IAEA’s board of governors in Vienna.

To the frustration of the US and EU, the agreement does not address the UN Security Council’s main demand – that Iran suspend uranium enrichment, the most sensitive part of its nuclear programme. But the plan marks a fresh attempt by Iran to co-operate with the IAEA and answer – over a three-month period – a list of questions about shadowy aspects of the programme.

Iran agreed to give a larger number of UN inspectors access to facilities and to provide information about the acquisition of advanced centrifuge technology. It also pledged to explain the highly enriched uranium contamination found at a technical university in Tehran.

US and EU officials have criticised the IAEA deal as ambiguous and insist they will pursue a new UN sanctions resolution. Diplomats from the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany will meet next week to consider a third round of sanctions.

Earlier UN decisions have targeted Iran’s arms exports, a leading bank and the elite Revolutionary Guards force. The US, meanwhile, has stepped up its unilateral financial sanctions, complicating dealings for international banks with Iran.

But Russia and China, two permanent Security Council members with veto power, are likely to be more sympathetic to the Iranian argument that the agreement with the IAEA should be tested before more sanctions are imposed. Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the IAEA, is also of that view. The case for patience at the UN was bolstered by the latest IAEA assessment, which says that Iran appears to be making slower than expected progress in uranium enrichment.

Mr Jalili said Iran had suspended its uranium enrichment programme for two years in 2004 and 2005, under an agreement with European governments, but that all it got out of this was a demand that it shut down the programme permanently.

If the main problem between Iran and the world community was that Tehran has not been transparent over nuclear experiments, then the IAEA agreement should address that non-transparency, he said. “The only solution is to take it (the issue) from the Security Council and back to the IAEA,” he said.

When asked if another round of sanctions would threaten the IAEA agreement, he would only say that Tehran would halt “voluntary” measures that it was now undertaking.