**UN atomic watchdog meets on Iran as sanctions loom**

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*http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hQ9pLnwJNiuxz3dcCwTqIMXs3RHQ*

VIENNA — Iran's controversial nuclear drive tops the agenda at a week-long meeting of the UN atomic watchdog starting here Monday as world powers are poised to slap new sanctions on Tehran.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's 35-member board of governors was scheduled to convene at 10:30 am (0830 GMT) for a heavy agenda, focussing not only on Iran and Syria, but also wider discussions on nuclear programmes in the Middle East.

But it was Iran that was again set to dominate as the UN Security Council prepared to pass another round of punitive actions on the Islamic republic over its refusal to halt sensitive nuclear activities which the West believes masks a covert drive to build a bomb.

Last week, the IAEA circulated its latest report on Iran, in which it found that Tehran is pressing ahead with its contested uranium enrichment activities -- despite three existing rounds of UN sanctions -- and is now producing enriched uranium at even higher levels of purification.

The report said Iran had produced at least 5.7 kilos (12.5 pounds) of higher-enriched uranium, ostensibly for a research reactor that makes radioisotopes for medical purposes.

But the West fears the material could be ultimately intended for a nuclear weapon, and even the IAEA itself says it remains concerned about the true nature of the activities.

Iran has so far been enriching uranium to levels of no more than 5.0 percent, but started enriching to close to 20 percent purification in February, claiming it wanted to ensure a supply of fuel for the research reactor in case an international supply deal fell through.

The UN Security Council has already ordered Iran to halt all enrichment activities. Thus, the move to higher levels of purification drew wide condemnation because it brings the Islamic republic closer to levels needed to make the fissile material for a nuclear bomb, especially as the West charges that Iran does not have the technology to turn the material into the fuel rods for the reactor.

In an IAEA-brokered deal last October, the United States, Russia and France proposed they take most of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) and turn it into the much-needed fuel rods.

But Iran refused to take up the offer and has drawn up an alternative deal with Brazil and Turkey instead.