Iran Wants U.N. Arms Embargo Lifted

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Iran is pushing for a United Nations arms embargo to be completely lifted as part of the international community’s moves to improve relations with Tehran in the wake of an emerging nuclear agreement, a senior Iranian diplomat said Monday.

The diplomat said his government wasn’t specifically linking the lifting of a U.N. ban on arms sales to a nuclear accord. But he said the U.S. and European Union no longer could justify placing curbs on Iran’s military and ballistic-missile programs.

“This issue does not belong to the nuclear file so the natural question is: What has been the reason for the inclusion of arms embargo in the resolution in the first place?” the official said. “So this is a question that should be posed to our European and American partners…What was the reason that you put this issue in the agenda of the Security Council?”

The demand is among the final issues still being negotiated between Iran and six world powers—Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the U.S.

The Obama administration has set Tuesday as the deadline for concluding the talks. But U.S. and Iranian officials have suggested privately in recent days that the negotiations could extend to later in the week.

U.S. officials have said a new U.N. Security Council resolution must be drafted as part of any final agreement to lift associated sanctions. They say the resolution must maintain elements of the arms embargo and other restrictions.

Current resolutions ban Iran from producing nuclear fuel, mining uranium, and developing ballistic missiles that could be used to carry an atomic bomb.

Iran insists its nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes only, such as generating electricity.

The senior Iranian official indicated that the U.S. demands weren’t acceptable, adding that the U.N. Security Council’s perception of Iran needed to change to support a nuclear accord.

“In our opinion, the treatment of Iran by the Security Council has been terrible, to put it mildly,” the official said. “If they want to open a new page in relations with Iran, they have to make this hard choice.”

The U.N. has imposed four rounds of economic sanctions on Iran in a bid to pressure Tehran into stopping its nuclear work.

Iran is also under a broader U.N. arms embargo that seeks to prevent it from aiding and arming political and military allies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and the Palestinian territories.

The Iranian official in Vienna said there has been significant progress in negotiations between Iran and the world powers over the past two weeks, adding that only a few final issues needed to be resolved.

He said the arrival in Vienna, beginning on Sunday, of the foreign ministers representing the six countries negotiating with Iran would be crucial to forging a final agreement.

The negotiator said his country didn’t want its diplomatic partners to seek another formal extension of the talks. But he said Tehran didn’t see Tuesday as a firm deadline to complete the process.

“We do not see any definite deadline as to our work here,” said the Iranian official. “Even if we pass July 9th…there will be another period which all of us can continue to work.”

The Republican chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Ed Royce (R., Calif.) sharply criticized Iran’s calls for a lifting of the arms embargo and the curbs on its missile program.

Mr. Royce repeated concerns raised by U.S. lawmakers that any sanctions relief given to Tehran could provide it with new funds to support its military allies in the Middle East, such as the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon.

“With tens of billions of sanctions-relief cash likely coming, Iran now wants free rein to arm Hezbollah terrorists, assist Assad in Syria, and aid Houthi rebels in Yemen,” Mr. Royce said.