

Top US envoy to join Iran talks

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WASHINGTON: The US said yesterday it was sending a top envoy to nuclear crisis talks with Iran on a "one-time" mission to underline Washington's conditions for ending the atomic stalemate.

Under-Secretary of State William Burns will go "to listen" to Tehran's reply to an incentives offer for freezing uranium enrichment, said White House spokeswoman Dana Perino, who emphasised "we are not there to negotiate."

But the number-three US diplomat's presence at Saturday's talks between EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Tehran's nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili will "clarify the consequences" - more sanctions - if Iran rejects the package, she said.

"It's designed to press the advantage, show that we are serious about the diplomatic path, but that there are consequences if Iran doesn't accept the offer. The Iranians have an opportunity here," a senior US administration official said.

"The refreshed incentives package, along with new European sanctions and the effects of the sanctions tell us this is the right step.

And Burns may restate US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's offer to "meet with her (Iranian) counterpart anytime, anywhere, to move forward on negotiations of they would halt uranium enrichment," said Perino.

His mission to Geneva, a reversal of US President George W Bush's past policy for grappling with Iran's suspect nuclear programme, comes with time fast running out for a solution before Bush's term ends in January next year.

"This will be a one time US participation to demonstrate that the P5 plus one ... is united in its longstanding principle that Iran, in order to take advantage of an incentives package that is quite generous, has to halt its nuclear enrichment," said Perino.

The P5 plus one groups Britain, China, France, Russia, the US - the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - and Germany in a diplomatic effort to end what the West fears is a covert nuclear weapons drive.

Asked whether this was final shot at ending the standoff without resorting to force, Perino replied: "What this does show is how serious we are when we say that we want to try to solve this diplomatically."

Recent, seemingly contradictory messages out of Iran on the incentives package are symptoms of an internal "debate" in the Islamic republic's leadership on how to manage the standoff, she said.