

Clinton: Us Prepared For New Sanctions If Outreach To Iran Fails

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says the United States is laying groundwork for new sanctions against Iran if outreach to Tehran on its nuclear program fails to produce results. Clinton says the Obama administration's call for dialogue provides more leverage in efforts to persuade Iran to halt uranium enrichment.

Clinton told Congress the administration's conciliatory policy toward Iran is not open-ended, and that if efforts to persuade that country to halt enrichment and return to negotiations on its nuclear program fail, Tehran would face tighter sanctions.

The Secretary raised the prospect of additional sanctions at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing under questioning from committee chairman Howard Berman, who said he is concerned Iran might see a more friendly U.S. approach as merely a green light to pursue nuclear weapons.

"I cannot get away from the fact that Iran's efforts to acquire a nuclear-weapons capability keep going ahead, and that this engagement cannot be so open ended that we essentially pass the threshold that we are seeking to avoid by virtue of the engagement," said Howard Berman.

Clinton told Berman the Obama administration has no illusions about its engagement with Iran and is operating on two tracks, offering dialogue but also preparing for additional punitive action if the outreach is spurned or inconclusive.

"Yes we are more than willing to reach out to the Iranians to discuss a range of issues assuming they are willing to reach back," said Hillary Clinton. "As the President said in his inaugural address, we will hold out our hand-they have to unclench their fist. But we are also laying the groundwork for the kind of very tough, I think you said, crippling sanctions that might be necessary in the event our offers are either rejected or the process is inconclusive or unsuccessful."

The Secretary said the administration's effort to engage Iran - on the nuclear issue and other topics - will strengthen its position in a drive for additional international sanctions if that proves necessary.

The Bush administration spurned direct contacts with Iran without a prior commitment by Tehran to halt enrichment.

But the new administration has committed to be a full participant in nuclear contacts with Iran by the P5 Plus One, the five permanent U.N. Security Council member countries and Germany.

The Security Council has approved three sanctions resolutions against Iran because of its defiance of demands for transparency on its nuclear program, which it says is entirely peaceful.

Efforts by the previous administration for more sanctions were blocked last year amid resistance from Russia and China

On another issue, Clinton lamented the lack of cooperation by Iran on the case of Robert Levinson, a former FBI agent believed missing in Iran for more than two years.

She also said Iranian-American journalist Roxana Saberi, sentenced by Iran to eight years in prison on spy charges earlier this month, is being held in an arbitrary, terribly unfair and unjustified way and should be allowed to return home.

The Obama administration has rejected the spy charge as baseless.