

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Behrouz Kamalvandi said here on Saturday the Islamic Republic faces no problems in exploring, converting and enriching uranium.

Kamalvandi made the remark at a conference on resistance economy and a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). "Some Western countries are not allowed to enrich (uranium) but we have no problem in exploring, converting and enriching uranium," he said.

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Iranian Interior Ministry's election headquarters in a ceremony on Saturday launched official work for the upcoming presidential and municipal council elections.

The ceremony was attended by Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli and officials from across the country in charge of holding the elections. Iran's 12th presidential election is scheduled for on May 19, 2017. The country will simultaneously hold the 5th City and Village Councils elections and also midterm parliamentary elections for a number of constituencies.

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## \$80 Billion of Oil Deals Drawn Up for Signing

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- Iran is negotiating \$80 billion of oil deals for signing, some of which are expected to be finalized no later than the next three months, two senior officials said in Tehran on Saturday.

Top negotiator Abbas Araqchi shrugged off concerns about the new U.S. president's commitment to a landmark nuclear accord with Iran, which has been hampering foreign investors from clinching deals with Tehran.

President Donald Trump has denounced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the agreement is called, as "the worst deal ever negotiated," pledging during his election campaign to tear it up.

Araqchi said, "If Trump rips up the JCPOA, he will have to suffer the costs. In that case, we will have to move cleverly and dexterously so that the costs don't befall us."

The official, who is also Iran's deputy foreign minister, said Trump was currently examining the accord but there were signs that he would stick with it.

"At the moment, the consensus is against Trump and he has no other choice than extending the JCPOA," Araqchi said.

The official, however, said delays in the conclusion of Iranian oil and gas deals are related to internal bickering over a new oil contract which has still to see the light of the day.

"At present, \$80 billion of contracts are being negotiated and the delay is due to the fact that there has to be national consensus over the IPC (Iran Petroleum Contract)," Araqchi

said.

Deputy Minister of Petroleum Amir Hussein Zamaninia said 25 MoUs have been signed with international oil companies so far, adding they would be finalized starting from the Iranian month of Khordad on May 22.

"The value of the MoUs which are still being negotiated will be \$80-85 billion if they are turned into contracts," he said.

Over the past year since the implementation of the JCPOA, Iran has won back its oil customers and raised production to the levels before sanctions were imposed on the country.

Zamaninia said Iran has boosted its oil and condensate exports to more than 2.63 million barrels per day, adding the country earned about \$34 billion from the exports in the current Persian year which ends on March 20.

Among major oil firms, France's Total has pledged about \$5 billion of investment in Iran, but the company awaits U.S. green light to implement it, he added.

"We understand it. Total has spent about \$20 million in Iran in recent months and is preparing its plans," Zamaninia said.

Meanwhile, Araqchi hailed the nuclear agreement, saying it had served its purpose.

"The JCPOA has cleared all the obstacles which were on the way of Iran's economy, and allowed the economy to move forward. However, we don't claim there are no non-JCPOA obstacles," he said.

"Having oil production and exports restored to their previous state within a year was a masterpiece," he added.

## S-300 Intercepts Targets During Test: Iranian Skies Secure But Deadly for Enemies



Iran's advanced S-300 air defense system is being prepared for test at a central desert.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iran's advanced S-300 air defense system, delivered by Russia following a July 2015 nuclear deal after years of delay, is now operational, state television reported on Saturday.

Iran had been trying to acquire the system for years to ward off repeated threats by the occupying regime of Israel to bomb its nuclear facilities, but Russia had held off delivery in line with UN sanctions imposed over the nuclear program.

"The S-300 air defense system has been tested... in the presence of government and military officials," the television said.

It said that the test at a desert base had seen several targets, including a ballistic missile and a drone, intercepted.

Air defense commander General

Farzad Esmaili told the television that a domestically manufactured air defense system dubbed Bavar 373 which was "more advanced than the S-300" would be tested very soon.

"The S-300 is a system that is deadly for our enemies and which makes our skies more secure," he said.

Iran's activation of the defense system comes amid mounting tensions with the new U.S. administration of President

Donald Trump, who imposed sanctions after Iran tested a medium-range ballistic missile in January.

A U.S. Navy surveillance ship had a close encounter with an Iranian navy frigate in the Middle East, CBS News has reported.

The frigate came within 150 yards of the USNS Invincible on Thursday in the Gulf of Oman, just south of the strategic Strait of Hormuz, it said. The sea separates Oman from southeastern Iran.

The encounter was deemed "unprofessional" but not unsafe because the frigate was on a parallel course with the Invincible at the point of closest approach, the television claimed.

The deal to buy the S-300 system was originally signed in 2007 but Russia suspended it in 2010 citing a UN ban on arms sales to Iran.

It was revived after the nuclear deal between Iran and major powers went into effect in January last year.

In August, state television aired footage of the system being installed around the Fordo nuclear site in a mountain near Qom, south of the capital.

The Russian-made missile defense system is one of the most advanced of its kind in the world, offering long-range protection against both aircraft and missiles.

The Zionist regime had long sought to block the sale, which analysts say could impede a potential Israeli strike on Tehran's nuclear facilities. Other Zionist officials have expressed concern that the systems could reach Syria and Hezbollah, diluting the occupying regime's regional air supremacy.

Israel claims its air force has trained for a scenario in which it would have to carry out strikes in Syria or Iran on facilities defended by the S-300.

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## French Minister Admits in Tehran: No Economic Relations Without Banking Ties

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- France wants to encourage the "normalization" of banking relations with Iran to improve economic relations with the Islamic Republic, French Economy Minister Michel Sapin said here Saturday.

"We can't work on developing our economic relations if we don't also normalize our banking relations," he said after meeting his Iranian counterpart Ali Tayebnia.

"Over the past few months, relations (between Iran and France) have considerably developed. There are projects being realized, contracts being signed," he said.

But "financial circuits need to be normalized. It's our aim, our will – even if it can't be done in a day."

Trust must be built "to allow companies – if they so wish – to have financing channels that are safe and efficient," Sapin said.

French and other European companies have returned to Iran since the partial lifting of sanctions in January last year when a

landmark nuclear deal with world powers came into force.

But international banks have not re-established financial circuits with Iran, fearing reprisals from Washington which has maintained some economic sanctions against the country.

Tensions have mounted since the January inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly slammed the July 2015 nuclear deal.

Washington last month imposed new sanctions on individuals and companies supporting Iran's ballistic missile program and on its Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC).

Sapin said France would encourage its banks to work with Iran, which they have so far refused to do.

"France's big banks are international banks. They work around the world including in the United States. It is therefore normal that they worry about respecting

American rules with regards to their American activities," Sapin said.

"I can't blame them, but they need to rebuild trust," he said.

"We can work with them to understand the rules and find good reasons to work towards developing our relations" with Iran.

The U.S. government has thwarted many funding projects and deals in Iran during the past months, a London-based daily says.

Citing European banks' sources, Asharq al-Awsat said many visits by European delegations to Tehran since the lifting of sanctions on Iran in January 2016 had failed to bear fruit.

The paper said European investors had to forgo most projects because their operations fell foul of sanctions imposed on a number of Iranian entities blacklisted by U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

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## Pro-Palestine Students Face Crackdown in UK

LONDON (Dispatches) -- Pro-Palestine activists on British university campuses fear a crackdown is taking place against them following the cancellation of several events affiliated to the Israeli Apartheid Week initiative and increasing regulation and monitoring of their activities.

The concerns come with universities under mounting pressure to demonstrate compliance with the government's Prevent counter-terrorism strategy, and university staff advised to "risk-assess and manage" Palestine-related activism as part of their Prevent Duty responsibilities.

"Vocal support for Palestine" and "Opposition to Israeli settlements in Gaza" are included in a list of "contentious topics" in the

presentation on a website, Safe Campus Communities, created for university staff to help them fulfill their Prevent Duty obligations.

At least two events linked to Israel Apartheid Week have been cancelled or postponed this week, including a lecture hosted by the Palestine society at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and an Israeli checkpoint stunt at the University of Exeter.

The cancellations also sparked fears about freedom of speech on campus after more than 200 academics, including 100 professors, signed an open letter condemning attempts to silence campus discussion about the occupying regime of Israel and its treatment of Palestinians.

Checkpoint Event Halted

Students at Exeter University were told that their checkpoint stunt had been cancelled because the activity could be deemed "discriminatory and considered harassment against certain students."

"The student guild approved it on safety grounds but for the first time in 14 years the university denied our permission by saying in a letter that the stunt could be illegal," said Gabriel, a student at Exeter.

"The university did not give us a chance to suggest alternative arrangements and gave a blanket ban saying there was no way our event can be allowed to take place."

Exeter University said it had cancelled the checkpoint stunt because it was "planned in a very busy part of campus."

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