

Brown pushes for world reduction in nuclear weapons as he makes Iran offer

PM urges Tehran to take advantage of the international community's willingness to negotiate



A view of the nuclear enrichment plant of Natanz in central Iran. Photograph: EPA

The UK is to push for a new multilateral deal to reduce the number of [nuclear weapons](#) stockpiled around the world, [Gordon Brown](#) said today, as he pledged that Britain was "ready" to reduce its own number of Trident warheads.

In his first speech on nuclear disarmament since May, Brown said that a new deal to reduce world stockpiles of atomic weapons was close.

"Britain has cut the number of its nuclear warheads by 50% since 1997 ... If it is possible to reduce the number of UK warheads further, consistent with our national deterrence requirements and with the progress of multilateral discussions, Britain will be ready to do so," he said.

"We must begin by reducing the number of nuclear weapons still out there in the world ... Between them, the US and Russia retain around 95%."

In the same speech the prime minister renewed his offer to [Iran](#) for international help in developing a civil [nuclear power](#) industry providing Tehran ends its uranium enrichment programme.

The prime minister said Iran's atomic programme had become a "critical" threat in his first comments on the country since a February International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) report showed that Tehran had not suspended enrichment. Brown laid out plans for a "uranium enrichment bond" whereby nuclear power-producing countries would guarantee the supply of enriched uranium to those countries that were not self-sufficient, providing safeguards were in place.

The government would also like to see enhanced powers of inspection.

Insiders said the speech was the prime minister's chance to present his plan ahead of Barack Obama's visit to the UK for the G20 summit on 2 April.

The IAEA said last month that Tehran had succeeded in enriching a tonne of uranium, technically giving it enough for a single warhead.

The US has developed its position on Iran's non-civilian nuclear programme since Obama's inauguration. The US president sent a secret letter to the Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, suggesting that the deployment of America's proposed \$4bn-a-year missile shield in eastern Europe could be halted if Moscow persuaded Tehran to abandon its nuclear weapon ambitions. Obama views Russia as critical to his efforts to halt Iran's suspected nuclear weapons programme.

However, it is thought that the new US administration is holding off from developing a distinct new line until Iranian elections in June.

At Lancaster House in London today, Brown set out means to help non-nuclear states acquire the new sources of energy they need while still meeting international commitments halving carbon emissions by 2050 – something Downing Street aides said would require the building of 32 nuclear reactors around the world each year for the foreseeable future.

The prime minister said: "Iran is a test case for this new philosophy of the right to civil nuclear power with sanctions for rule breakers. Let me be unequivocal: Iran has the same absolute right to a peaceful civil nuclear programme as any other country. Indeed, the UK and international community stand ready to help Iran achieve it.

"But let me be equally clear that Iran's current nuclear programme is unacceptable. Iran has concealed nuclear activities, refused to cooperate with the IAEA, and flouted UN security council resolutions. Its refusal to play by the rules leads us to view its nuclear programme as a critical proliferation threat."

"Iran therefore faces a clear choice: continue in this way and face further and tougher sanctions, or change to a UN-overseen civil nuclear energy programme that will bring the greatest benefits to its citizens."

Brown also reaffirmed his long-term commitment to see the world "getting to zero", which would see the international community commit to abolishing nuclear weapons.

Brown's adviser on nuclear non-proliferation, the Liberal Democrat peer Lady Williams, called on him to take action on what she called a "drastic decline of British nuclear knowledge".

She said: "Nagasaki was 70 years ago and there are now left very few people who know anything about it. There is now a very real worry that there will not be enough skilled people to fill the inspections."

A Downing Street spokesman suggested patience was running out, saying: "The government made a generous offer to Iran in the summer – we will help you with enrichment of uranium – but so far we have not had a satisfactory response to that."

Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has previously rejected similar offers, most recently last summer from the so-called E3+3 group – Britain, France and Germany, plus the US, Russia and China.

The defence secretary, John Hutton, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that Brown's speech was "a restatement of what our policy is and an invitation to Iran – and I think a very important one – to come back within the framework of international law and develop its civilian nuclear power programme in a way that doesn't pose the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation".

Hutton said Britain backed Iran's right under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, but remained concerned that Tehran was in breach of five UN security council resolutions regarding its nuclear activities.

"We are entitled to regard it as a proliferation threat," he said. "The consequences for Iran are very clear – they can continue facing international isolation or they can come back within the framework of international law."