

## Iran must grasp the world's offer

Published: July 7 2008 03:00 | Last updated: July 7 2008 03:00

Iran's dispute with the international community over its nuclear programme remains deadlocked. For the last two years, the world's major powers have offered Iran a package of economic and political incentives to suspend its uranium enrichment programme, a programme which some western powers believe is ultimately aimed at producing a nuclear bomb. But Iran's position - that it wants to go on with uranium enrichment and is interested only in producing civil nuclear energy - remains unchanged.

Still, there are indications that the Iranian regime is thinking harder about the international offer. Iran's chief nuclear negotiator will this month meet Javier Solana, the European Union foreign policy chief, to try to break the stalemate. There is no guarantee that the meeting will end in success. But the Iranians have not yet given a definitive "No" to the west's package.

This month's meeting will come at a critical juncture in the years of negotiation between Iran and the west. Thus far, this stand-off has contained little drama. But there are growing fears in the west that Israel may decide to launch a military strike this autumn against Iran's nuclear facilities. There are numerous reasons why Israel may be considering this. Israel thinks that Iran is far closer to getting a nuclear weapon than other western powers believe. Israel fears too - perhaps wrongly - that if Barack Obama is elected US president this November, it will lose US political support in its struggle with Iran.

An Israeli attack on Iran would be disastrous for the region and the world. It could only delay, not halt, Iran's uranium enrichment plan and give it far greater justification. It could drag the US into a regional war and polarise the region for decades.

Such an attack must not happen. Instead, all sides must do everything to ensure that the diplomatic route is successful. Iran should begin to grasp the international community's incentives package. This offer is generous, pledging a state-of-the-art civil nuclear programme and significant economic rewards if Iran suspends uranium enrichment. At the same time, the US must look at what it can do to bolster the negotiations with Iran, whether by opening up diplomatic negotiations with Tehran or extending further security guarantees.

For now, Iran is sending mixed signals which suggest its game plan is to delay, rather than resolve, the crisis. But there are also signs of a heated debate within the Iranian regime about the direction to take. The hope must be that the debate is won by those who want to start some serious talking.