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Brazil rebuffs US, says it will go own way on Iran

By MATTHEW LEE

BRASILIA, Brazil – Brazil rebuffed a U.S. appeal for new sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, vowing during a visit from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton not to "bow down" to gathering international pressure.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva pre-empted Clinton even before she could make the case for new United Nations Security Council penalties. Silva is an outspoken opponent of sanctions, and his country currently sits on the Security Council, which will be asked to approve its toughest-ever penalties on Iran later this year.

"It is not prudent to push Iran against a wall," Silva told reporters hours before meeting with Clinton. "The prudent thing is to establish negotiations."

Clinton told a news conference she respects Brazil's position but thinks if there is any possibility of negotiating with Iran, it would happen only after a new round of sanctions.

Iran has accelerated its disputed nuclear program in the face of previous U.N. penalties, but the United States and other supporters say a renewed demonstration of world resolve could finally push Iran to the bargaining table.

"The door is open for negotiations. We never slammed it shut," Clinton said. "But we don't see anybody, even in the far-off distance, walking toward it."

The Obama administration took office last year pledging to reach out to Iran and make the case that Tehran had more to lose than gain from pressing ahead with nuclear development that much of the world suspects is aimed at building a bomb.

Yet the administration has done an about-face after a frustrating year that saw nuclear gains by Iran with no sign the country is interested in serious talks with Washington. The two countries have been estranged since the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, and there is almost no economic or diplomatic contact between them.

Iran does have vast business and other ties with most of the rest of the world, and Clinton said the oil giant is exploiting its relationships to try to avoid new U.N. penalties.

"We see an Iran that runs to Brazil, an Iran that runs to Turkey, an Iran that runs to China, telling different things to different people," Clinton said angrily.

Standing with her at a press conference in the Brazilian capital, Foreign Minister Celso Amorim was not persuaded.

"We will not simply bow down to an evolving consensus if we do not agree," Amorim said. "We have to think by ourselves and with our values and principles."

Silva is scheduled to visit Tehran on May 15, and US officials who participated in Clinton's meetings on Wednesday suggested they would like to see the Security Council vote on sanctions before then. If that happens, the officials said, Silva might be able to serve as an informal envoy who could urge the Iranians to negotiate despite new penalties.

Silva, who hosted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Brazil last year, said he would have a "frank" conversation with Ahmadinejad about Iran's nuclear program.

"I want for Iran the same thing I want for Brazil: to use the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes," he said. "If Iran agrees with that, Iran will have the support of Brazil."

The U.S. officials said that despite clear differences at the moment, the Brazilians assured Clinton their current position was not "etched in stone."

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private diplomatic exchange.

Iran already is under three sets of U.N. Security Council sanctions for refusing to stop uranium enrichment — a potential pathway to nuclear weapons — and other activities, generating concerns that it seeks to build a bomb. It insists it is enriching only to make nuclear fuel for an envisaged reactor network.

Another round of sanctions could pass without Brazil's vote. But the United States and other backers of new sanctions want as wide a backing as possible to show Iran that its behavior is costing it friendships around the globe.

