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## **Schroeder's Iran Visit Could Help Improve Groundwork for Talks**

By: Julie Gregson (dpa/reuters)

Ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has been criticized for meeting Iran's president during his visit to Tehran last week. But some analysts say the trip could help defuse the dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder held talks with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran during a four-day visit to Iran last week.

The trip has stirred controversy in Germany which is involved in persuading the Islamic nation to give up its uranium enrichment program which the West suspects is being used to produce nuclear weapons.

Schroeder's meeting with Ahmadinejad, whose past comments denying the Holocaust were widely condemned, have also riled Jewish leaders in Germany.

But some analysts said this week that Schroeder's meeting with Ahmadinejad could help reinforce the West's new willingness to explore diplomatic solutions with Iran and help US President Barack Obama's push to negotiate with Iran over its disputed nuclear program.

Iran expert Johannes Reissner from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) told news agency Reuters on Monday that "Schroeder's visit is a clear signal to Iran that we are serious about finding a political solution."

In addition, a number of politicians from Schroeder's Social Democrats and from the opposition Greens and the liberal free-market FDP welcomed the trip as a sign that the West was willing to talk to Iran and defuse the long-running dispute with the country over its nuclear activities.

"It is fundamentally correct that we try to engage in dialog with the Iranian government," Green foreign policy expert Juergen Trittin told Reuters.

"We have to find out whether Iran is also prepared to set a new political course in keeping with US president Barack Obama. It's only possible to find that out by going there," Rolf Mützenich, the Social Democratic Party's Iran expert, told the agency.

Some fellow party members, however, criticized the timing of the visit ahead of June's elections in Iran.

Eckart von Klaeden, foreign policy expert from Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Party (CDU), was also scathing in his criticism of the visit.

He told German radio station *Deutschlandfunk* that it was "damaging" to give international recognition to "misanthropic" figures such as Ahmadinejad.

## **Business motives?**

Other commentators have said Schroeder was merely serving business interests during last week's controversial trip, accusing him of acting as the mouthpiece of investors tired of export restrictions.

Germany has been one of the biggest exporters to Iran in recent years. And new figures, reported by Reuters news agency on Tuesday, Feb. 24, showed that the trade volume rose last year.

This despite Berlin's significant cuts in the values of new credit guarantees -- from 503.4 million euros in 2007 to 133 million euros (\$169.5 million) in 2008. German companies receive guarantees for exporting goods to markets considered risky.

## **Schroeder played by the rule**

But the German government has defended the former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's trip to Tehran.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's deputy spokesman, Thomas Steg, said there was no cause to criticize Schroeder. He said he assumed that Schroeder's remarks to Iranian leaders were in keeping with German policy towards Iran.

Steg added that Schroeder had abided by the rules governing the behaviour of ex-leaders and informed Chancellor Angela Merkel's well in advance.

The former chancellor met Ahmadinejad behind closed doors after delivering a speech in the Iranian capital criticizing the Iranian leader's stance against Israel and his denial of the Holocaust.

Schroeder's office said the trip was private and that he had footed the bill himself. Schroeder refused to comment personally on Monday.

The former chancellor had, according to his staff, travelled to Iran upon the invitation of a friend, Majid Samii, who is an eminent Iranian-born neurosurgeon. Iran's Foreign Ministry also insisted it was not a political trip.

Despite these denials, observers say that figures of Schroeder's stature are automatically regarded as political visitors in Iran.