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1pm update

EU 'declaration of war' over fusion

Staff and agencies
Friday November 26, 2004

Japan said today it would continue with its bid to host a global nuclear fusion project and warned the European Union against going ahead without Tokyo.

However, EU ministers agreed in Brussels to continue seeking Japan's backing to build the world's first thermonuclear reactor in France - but to go ahead without Tokyo if there was no deal by the end of the year.

"It is regrettable that they are talking about taking unilateral action," Satoru Ohtake, director for fusion energy at Science and Technology Ministry, told Reuters. "There is no change in Japan's policy to seek to host the project."

Nuclear fusion has been touted as a long-term solution to the world's energy problems, but 50 years of research have so far failed to produce a commercially viable fusion reactor.

The EU would prefer an agreement with all six parties in the project: itself, Japan, China, Russia, the United States, and South Korea. But if no deal was reached, the EU would press ahead and build the 10bn euro reactor in Cadarache, France, with as many partners as possible.

"The two sides have different ideas, and therefore we should take time to have good discussions," Ohtake said. "The fact that they are setting a deadline for their rival to make a concession is something like a declaration of war."

The United States and South Korea have supported building the reactor in Rokkasho, a Japanese fishing village, but EU sources believe they would back Cadarache if Tokyo steps aside. The EU might offer Tokyo a privileged partner role in the mammoth nuclear fusion research plan to compensate for not building it in Japan, officials said. But Japan has stood firm on its proposal.

"We don't know about their plan to compensate. But if it is the same proposal as what they had before, it is worth no consideration," Ohtake said. "It is not acceptable that the EU offers compensation to Japan on condition that the EU hosts the project."

Construction of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) is currently forecast to cost some 4.6bn euros over a 10-year period. The EU intends to cover 40 percent of that from its budget while France has proposed doubling its contribution to 20 percent of the costs. Diplomats say the EU offer might include creating a fusion institute in Japan worth one billion euros for pre-research activity linked to the project on condition that Japan raised its financial contribution to the reactor. Including a development phase, the ITER project is forecast to last 30 years.

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