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FRANCE CLOSING IN ON DEAL TO HOST ITER NUCLEAR REACTOR

Received Wednesday, 4 May 2005 10:54:00 GMT

PARIS, May 4 (AFP) - France appeared Wednesday to be heading towards a deal to build a ground-breaking nuclear reactor, with President Jacques Chirac all but declaring victory and a report in Tokyo that arch-rival Japan had given up on the project.

"France is on the verge of getting ITER sited at Cadarache" in the south of the country, Chirac told French television, using the acronym for the reactor. "We will have it at Cadarache!"

In Tokyo, the top-selling daily Yomiuri Shimbun reported Wednesday that the Japanese government had begun negotiations about "giving up its bid" to build the reactor in Rokkasho-mura, a northern village near the Pacific Ocean.

Citing government sources, it said the decision followed recent unofficial talks with the European Union, which has been supporting France's bid.

As a result, the Yomiuri said, "it is now highly likely the reactor will be built in Cadarache, France."

Japan's vice science minister Akio Yuuki dismissed the report, saying that "we are not considering giving up our bid (for ITER) at all."

There is no change in our intention," he was quoted as telling reporters.

In Brussels, the European Commission said it too was unaware of any change and talks were continuing to "clarify the roles" of the various parties.

"We have received no official indication" that Japan may be ready to abandon its bid, a commission spokeswoman said.

The issue was likely to come up at talks Wednesday in Paris between French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier and Japanese counterpart Nobutaka Machimura.

Nevertheless, a deal does appear in the offing, according to what leaders and officials have been saying in recent days.

Interviewed late Tuesday, Chirac said that after France secured EU support for the project, "we then imposed ourselves with Russia, China, everyone."

"We are finishing negotiations with Japan," Chirac added.

"Do you imagine that happens all by itself? It happens because France has a voice that is listened to, certainly respected, even if sometimes it grates a little."

The ITER (International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor) project would emulate the sun's nuclear fusion to generate what its backers say could be an inexhaustible energy source of the future.

The budget is projected at some 10 billion euros (13 billion dollars) over the next 30 years, including 4.7 billion euros to build the reactor alone, and the plant is not expected to be operational before 2050.

Of the six parties which have been involved in long-running talks over the project, the United States and South Korea have supported Japan's bid to site ITER in Rokkasho-mura, while the EU, China and Russia backed France.

However, the European Union presidency Monday pointed to a new willingness by Japan to compromise, saying Tokyo was now ready to discuss the possibility of siting the reactor in Europe.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi agreed after talks Monday with EU leaders in Luxembourg that they would aim for "earliest possible agreement."

A Japanese government source told the Yomiuri that talks between Tokyo and EU officials were in a "final phase" and should conclude later this month. The agreement would then be taken to the six-party talks as early as next month.

Quite apart from the politics, the science behind the ITER project presents an immense technological challenge.

Under the process, scientists would fuse atomic nuclei together to release energy in the same way the sun does, but achieving that kind of sustained and stable reaction would require a gas field heated to 100 million degrees inside an intense magnetic field.

But the advantages are huge -- one of the hydrogen isotopes needed to fuel the process is found in water while the other can be man-made, and a plentiful supply would fill the void as the world moves away from oil, coal and natural gas.

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