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EU SAYS NO AGREEMENT ON FUSION REACTOR, FRANCE SAYS DEAL DONE

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BRUSSELS, May 5 (AFP) - The European Union and Japan have yet to reach an agreement on locating a revolutionary nuclear fusion reactor in southeastern France, rather than northern Japan, the EU said following talks Thursday in Geneva.

But this was denied by the French negotiator for the project, who insisted a deal had already been struck to build it in Cadarache, southeast France.

The European Commission -- which backs France's bid -- described the meeting as useful, but said a deal was still some way off.

"This morning's meeting was very constructive, and helped us make progress on the roles of the host and non-host countries," said Antonia Mochan, the spokeswoman for EU science and research commissioner Janez Potocnik.

"We are very hopeful of an agreement by July," she added.

The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) project has been the subject of fierce international wrangling as Japan and France vie to host the ambitious project, designed to emulate the power of the sun.

French President Jacques Chirac all but declared victory this week, while Japan was reported to have given up on its proposed site, the northern Japanese village of Rokkasho-mura -- although Tokyo denies this.

Thursday's talks, between the EU commission's research director, Achilleas Mitsos, and Japan's chief negotiator Tetsuhisa Shirakawa, were to tackle the issue of compensation for the country that does not host the project.

There has been speculation the EU could offer Japan sweeteners, such as a share of the construction contracts, in return for agreeing to let France host the ITER site.

Paris' negotiator for the ITER project repeated on Thursday that the parties had already agreed on the French site.

"As far as I know, the agreement has been reached and should be finalised and announced in the coming weeks," Pierre Lellouche told French radio RTL.

"There are plans for industrial compensation, which should enable the Japanese to come out of this honourably -- after becoming increasingly isolated in recent months," Lellouche said.

The ITER project, budgeted at 10 billion euros (13 billion dollars), is meant to clear the way for a plentiful future supply of clean power as the world moves away from coal, oil and natural gas.

Its backers say ITER would provide an inexhaustible energy source, although the plant is not expected to be operational before 2050.

Construction work is scheduled to start by the end of the year.

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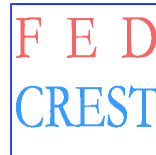
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