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### EU 'optimistic' ITER nuclear project will soon go to France

BRUSSELS (AFX) - The European Commission said it is confident that France will be selected as the site for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) project, as sensitive talks with Japan, the other bidder for the site, continue.

'We are optimistic about getting a result on ITER in favour of France,' European Commission spokesman Fabio Fabbi told Agence France-Presse.

Officials from the EU commission and Japan met to discuss the ITER site at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna today.

A Japanese official at the talks said that Tokyo was adamant in its view that the reactor should be built in Rokkasho-mura in northern Japan.

'We see no reason to change our position,' said Satoru Ohtaki, director of nuclear fusion at the Japanese ministry of science and technology.

'We shall put an extremely generous offer on the table' to obtain the right to build the reactor in Japan, he said.

Another meeting was planned in Vienna tomorrow bringing in the other ITER project partners: the US and South Korea -- which support the Japanese bid -- plus Russia and China, which back the EU bid.

'In our opinion, it would be counter-productive at this moment to give more information on these highly delicate negotiations,' an official with the EU's Dutch presidency said.

ITER is a test project for what is being billed as a clean, safe, inexhaustible energy source of the future. The project, emulating the sun's nuclear fusion, is not expected to generate electricity before 2050.

The two candidates to host ITER are Cadarache in southern France and Rokkasho-mura.

If Japan withdraws its bid at the Vienna talks, sources said the European Commission would submit the accord to a meeting of EU research ministers on Nov 26.

The accord would detail notably what Japan would get out of the project in return for backing out of hosting the site, the sources said.

The ITER budget is projected to be 10 bln eur over the next 30 years, including 4.7 bln eur to build the reactor. The EU plans to finance 40 pct of the total.

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