

Politics threatens to dominate nuclear fusion debate

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PARIS, Jan. 13 (Xinhuanet) -- French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said Monday that Europe could construct an experimental nuclear fusion reactor on its own if pushed to do so.

Raffarin was speaking in reaction to a comment from US Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham that the US favors a Japanese site for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) which France also wants to host.

"We have to have ITER even if we have to do it ourselves," a determined Raffarin told journalists. "The Europeans could do it, possibly with Canada. We won't let go of this."

Raffarin's remarks immediately sent shock waves across the world since France has been competing with Japan for the construction site of the multi-billion dollar project and this is the first time France has voiced its resolve to host ITER so directly.

The project in question is the world's largest-yet nuclear fusion power plant whose technology is touted as a solution to global energy problems. Once finished in 2050, ITER will generate clean, safe and inexhaustible electricity.

There are two bidding sites for the project. One is Rokkasho-mura, a remote fishing village in northern Japan. The other is the French southeastern town of Cadarache.

ITER's participants -- the EU, the United States, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and Canada -- are divided into two groups. The United States and South Korea back Rokkasho-mura. France is busy enlisting Russian and Chinese support for its Cadarache site.

Both countries have spared no effort in highlighting the advantages of their respective sites but what started out as a purely technical issue as to ITER's location has taken a distinctly political turn with the United States stepping forward and publicly airing its backing for Japan.

On Jan. 9, Abraham openly expressed US support for Japan to host the ITER, claiming Rokkasho-mura provides a superior site for the project.

This was the first time the United States has publicly revealed its preference for the Japanese site and has thrust previously hidden competition firmly into the spotlight.

Observers believe the outright US opposition to France's bid indicates Washington's retaliation for France's condemnation of the US invasion of Iraq.

In response, EU Research Commissioner Philippe Busquin has rebuked the US, terming Abraham's remarks "inappropriate and inopportune" coming at a time when evaluation of the bidding sites is still going on.

Raffarin's remarks Monday raised the stakes. With the EU as its steadfast supporter, France -- a forerunner in nuclear technology -- showed it is prepared to fight its corner with the US.

The French premier left leeway for France, however, saying they are still ready to cooperate with the United States on the project.

ITER's partners failed to choose between the two sites at a meeting in Washington on Dec. 20, and will gather again next month to try to resolve the issue.

Nuclear fusion is a process in which a massive amount of energy is produced when atomic particles fuse together. It is the opposite of nuclear fission used in existing nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons.

If successful, ITER will be the world's first commercially viable fusion reactor and could herald a world energy revolution. End item

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