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EU Gives Japan Until End-June to Accept Nuclear-Project Offer

March 7 (Bloomberg) -- The European Union gave Japan until the end of June to accept an offer of a "privileged partnership" in a 4.6 billion-euro (\$6.1 billion) experimental nuclear-fusion reactor project in France, saying construction must begin this year.

The EU made the partnership offer in November to break a deadlock in which China and Russia support France as host of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor and the U.S. and South Korea back Japan. The EU also said it would start the project in France with or without the support of Japan, the U.S. and Korea and committed itself to starting construction in 2005 - a step that requires up to six months of preparation.

"We need to find the solution very soon," EU Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik said at a Brussels press conference today. "We are in the most intensive phase of negotiations."

ITER, which would generate "clean" energy by fusing together light atoms such as hydrogen, would cost a total of about 10 billion euros including operating expenses over 35 years. France proposed Cadarache as the site and Japan put forward Rokkasho-Mura.

The 25-nation EU's offer would involve a bigger role for Japan in building ITER, managing the project and receiving research contracts from it.

Potocnik said he would be willing to intervene in talks between his staff and Japanese officials to help reach an agreement. "Only on a political level is it possible to get a solution quickly," he said.

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