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LDP lawmakers to ask Koizumi to show resolve to host fusion reactor

(Kyodo) _ A group of Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers agreed Thursday to ask Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to clearly state Japan's interest in hosting the world's first nuclear fusion reactor.

The ruling party lawmakers reached the agreement ahead of a March 27 meeting between Koizumi and French President Jacques Chirac in Tokyo, with the site for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, a multibillion-dollar project involving six parties, expected to be a major focus.

Tadamori Oshima, a former agriculture, forestry and fisheries minister, said the lawmakers have decided to adopt a resolution urging the government to draw ITER to Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, and to bring it to Koizumi ahead of his talks with Chirac.

"I'm not yet sure whether the ITER issue will definitely be taken up at the (Koizumi-Chirac) summit, but if it were, I would like the prime minister to clearly state Japan's resolve (to host ITER) and to specify the advantage of the Japanese site (to the French site)," Oshima told reporters.

The lawmakers made the move because Koizumi has remained silent on the issue which may indicate a lack of enthusiasm on Japan's behalf while Chirac has often spoken publicly about the need to bring ITER to Europe.

During the meeting, some LDP lawmakers demanded that the resolution call for the Japanese government to start building ITER in Japan in collaboration with the United States and South Korea if Japan fails to reach an agreement with the European Union, Oshima said.

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"We believe it's time that Japan sends a strong message" to the world that it is determined to host ITER while preserving the six-party framework, he said, adding the LDP lawmakers will draw up the resolution soon.

Former Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Takeo Hiranuma and Koji Omi, a former state minister for science and technology policy, also attended the meeting.

Over the last two years, Japan and the European Union have remained at odds over who would host ITER, which is projected to last 30 years and cost 1.3 trillion yen, or about \$13 billion.

South Korea and the United States are backing Japan's bid to host it in Rokkasho in northeastern Japan, while China and Russia favor the European Union's plan to build it in Cadarache in southeastern France.

On March 7, Janez Potocnik, EU commissioner for science and research, said the European Union will go ahead to

build ITER on its own this year if no agreement is reached with Japan.

Potocnik said Japan and the European Union have completed technical discussions and called for high-level political talks to end the simmering dispute. But Japanese officials said the two sides need to have further technical discussions before bringing the issue to a political level.

The European Union wants to start building the reactor by the end of 2005, with or without an international agreement.

The ITER project, which scientists say would lead to producing energy at lower costs and with less pollution, is the latest stage in a decade-long quest to develop nuclear fusion power since the plan emerged during a 1985 summit between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

In conventional nuclear fission power plants, heavy atoms are split to release energy. But in a fusion reactor, energy is harnessed by forcing the nuclei of light atoms together -- the same process that takes place at the core of the sun and makes it shine.

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