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LEAD: Japan, EU aim to reach conclusion on ITER by July

(Kyodo) _ (EDS: UPDATING WITH EU COMMISSIONER'S PRESS CONFERENCE)

Japan and the European Union agreed Tuesday to speed up talks over the world's first nuclear fusion reactor with an aim to reach a conclusion by July on which country should host the project.

European Commissioner for Science and Research Janez Potocnik of Slovenia, now in Tokyo for the talks with Japanese officials over the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, expressed confidence on the possibility of striking a deal by the deadline.

"I can clearly say that we have converged our positions very much. I am very optimistic, feeling that we can reach an agreement," Potocnik said at a news conference. "This political momentum which began now should lead to a final conclusion of negotiations in a way that both parties will see themselves in a win-win situation."

Earlier in the day, Potocnik met with Japan's Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister Nariaki Nakayama, and the two officials reached the agreement to accelerate the talks.

Nakayama separately told reporters that the European Union has made a new proposal and that the two sides "have entered a stage at which a political decision can be made" by the annual summit of the Group of Eight major countries in Gleneagles, Scotland, in early July.

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Japan and France are seeking to host ITER, a multibillion dollar project involving China, the European Union, Japan, Russia South Korea and the United States, but no decision on the site has been made yet.

The European Union wants to start building the reactor by the end of 2005 and has sought a political resolution over its site by July. Last month, Potocnik said the 25-nation body will go ahead to build ITER on its own this year if no agreement is reached with Japan.

In his news conference, the commissioner avoided touching on the possibility that the European Union will construct ITER with project members supporting France's bid to host the facility, namely China and Russia. "At this stage of negotiations, it is important to concentrate and do everything" to reach an accord among six project participants, he said.

"We would pursue a six-party agreement. We have to create the best possible conditions for our bilateral long-term cooperation in the area of science and research," he said.

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

The commissioner said Japan and the European Union are searching for a solution in a "broader approach," where the host country will give "privileged partnership" to a non-host country.

Potocnik said in that approach, a non-host country can take part in "side activities" of ITER, including its future development for commercial use. He said the project will be a "benefit of mankind" and stressed that there will be "no winners and no losers in this debate."

"It is for the sake of guaranteeing sustainable future energy, which will provide Japan, the European Union and other nations in this project with a new solution for the future," the commissioner said.

The project is expected to last 30 years and cost 1.3 trillion yen, or about \$13 billion, including 570 billion yen in construction costs for the facility itself.

Scientists say nuclear fusion serves as a long-term solution to the world's energy problems as it generates no greenhouse gas emissions and low levels of radioactive waste, while using abundant seawater as fuel.

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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