



Japan considers conceding ITER site to France

TOKYO, May 4, Kyodo - (EDS: UPDATING WITH MACHIMURA MEETING WITH BARNIER IN 5TH GRAF, EU RESPONSE IN 6TH GRAF)

Japan is considering giving up its bid to build the planned International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor in Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, and bowing out of the race with the other candidate site in Cadarache, southern France, sources close to the project said Wednesday.

The ballooning construction cost burden amid stalled negotiations has prompted Japan to consider withdrawing its bid, the sources said, citing reluctance from the Finance Ministry.

But the science and technology ministry maintains that the government's stance of seeking to win the bid remains unchanged.

"The ITER bid is still being negotiated and we have not given up," the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology said in a statement. "We will work and negotiate with the European Union and other participating countries based on our policy of winning the bid to build the ITER in Rokkasho and realize the ITER project."

Meanwhile in Paris, Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura told his French counterpart Michel Barnier that he hopes "to reach agreement in May or June" on the location in a way that is acceptable to both Japan and the European Union, Japanese government officials said.

EU officials in Brussels declined to comment on the Japanese reports. "We have not received any official news of any decision on the ITER," spokeswoman Antonia Mochan told reporters Wednesday, adding that the European Union is continuing talks with Japan.

The sources said the government is expected to seek understanding from the Aomori prefectural government over its possible withdrawal from the project.

Meanwhile, the government is expected to negotiate with the countries concerned so that Rokkasho will be able to win orders for ITER-related facilities and a demonstration reactor in the next stage.

Japan proposed to the ITER international consortium in June 2004 that if Rokkasho is chosen, the country will pay for half of the ITER construction fee estimated at about 285 billion yen, up from 48 percent. It also suggested providing 46 billion yen for the construction of related facilities in the European Union.

Analysts said that if Japan withdraws the bid, its financial burden will be significantly reduced, to about 100 billion yen.

The ITER plant is an experimental facility of thermonuclear fusion, at which nuclear fusion reactions that occur on the sun are produced by fusing the nuclei of heavy hydrogen and tritium at more than 100 million C. The energy produced from 1 gram of fuel in the facility is equivalent to that of 8 tons of oil.

The project -- which involves China, the European Union, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States -- is expected to last 30 years, including 10 years for construction. The project is estimated to cost 1.3 trillion yen, or about \$13 billion.

With the United States and South Korea supporting Japan while China and Russia side with the European Union, the site selection process has remained a tug-of-war. But Japan and the European Union agreed in April to reach a political resolution by the Group of Eight summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July.

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