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TokyoNow: Fusion reactor could make Rokkasho global science center

(Kyodo) _ Nearly 20 years after then U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev dreamed of future energy generation through nuclear fusion, Japan and Europe are at odds over which of them will host the world's first thermonuclear reactor.

Rokkasho, a village in northeastern Japan, has drawn attention as it houses Japan's proposed site for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, a multibillion-dollar project involving China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the European Union and the United States.

The village's 12,000 inhabitants anxiously await the outcome of stalled negotiations between Japan and the EU in the quest for one of the most promising energy sources for the future, especially as energy demand is surging in economies such as China and India.

The Rokkasho site near the Pacific Ocean is backed by South Korea and the United States, while China and Russia are in favor of the EU site, in Cadarache in southeastern France.

Rokkasho Mayor Kenji Furukawa says it has been a "huge aspiration" for the village to host ITER since the assembly of Aomori Prefecture, which covers Rokkasho, decided in 1995 to file a candidacy for the village.

Furukawa says the village has completed the necessary preparations for the project, such as improving industrial infrastructure and developing anti-earthquake technologies with help of the state, the Aomori prefectural government and the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute.

"ITER represents a dream for the village. It will help transform the village into an international center for science and education," he said. "We would like to work with researchers from around the world to create a new energy culture here and disseminate it to the world."

The 25-nation EU apparently wants to clinch a deal by the end of the year. But Japanese officials indicate the two sides are unlikely to solve the standoff until early next year, possibly by February or early March.

The ITER project, which scientists say would lead to energy creation at lower costs with much less pollution, is the latest stage in a decades-long quest to develop nuclear fusion power since such a plan emerged during a 1985 summit between Reagan and Gorbachev.

In conventional nuclear power plants based on nuclear fission technology, 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.

The six-party project is expected to last 30 years and cost 1.3 trillion yen (\$13 billion or 10 billion euros).

Rokkasho and Aomori Prefecture see an economic merit in hosting ITER, estimating it would bring at least 1.2 trillion yen into the prefecture and generate 104,000 jobs.

Asked whether the village can win public acceptance of disposal of low-level radioactive waste to be created from the running and eventual scrapping of ITER, Furukawa said residents have knowledge about the issue and can cope calmly with it because the village has collected information and carried out studies on nuclear-related issues for more than 10 years.

Rokkasho is already home to nuclear fuel cycle facilities run by Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., including a low-level radioactive waste disposal center.

Despite Furukawa's hope that Japan and the EU will break the impasse soon, some EU officials have suggested that if no deal is reached, the EU may consider pressing ahead to build the reactor in Cadarache with as many partners as possible.

Japan for its part has warned the EU against moving ahead without other partners but some circles in Japan are suggesting a similar action. On Friday, a group of lawmakers from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party requested in Tokyo that the government conduct a feasibility study on Japan proceeding with the ITER project with only the United States and South Korea.

The lawmakers include Tadamori Oshima, a former agriculture minister whose constituency is in Aomori Prefecture, Kaoru Yosano, chairman of the LDP's Policy Research Council, former trade minister Takeo Hiranuma, and Koji Omi, a former state minister for science and technology policy.

Although the government says it will stick to the six-party ITER framework, science ministry officials have begun talks with their counterparts in Washington and Seoul on the additional financial burdens, construction period, and the size of the ITER project in the event that the EU leaves the framework, an LDP source said.

Japan will also draw up a scenario for developing the ITER project in Rokkasho with the United States, South Korea, and some other Asian economies that have shown interest, the source said.

Japanese researchers involved in the ITER project from the beginning deplore the escalating row between Japan and the EU, saying leaders of the two sides must reconsider why the world needs next-generation energy projects such as ITER.

"We have come to a situation where only a political decision can solve the stalemate," a person familiar with Japan-EU negotiations said. "We'd like our political leaders to offer bold compromises for both sides and find a common solution so that scientists and engineers, who have been waiting so long, can roll up their sleeves and begin work, from tomorrow if possible."

"We must not forget that the Cold War leaders called for 'fusion,' not 'fission,'" he said.

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