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NEWS

French Prime Minister Endangers ITER Negotiations to Solve Domestic Brain Drain Crisis

By PEB

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France, which is competing with Japan for the six-billion dollar International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), will not give up its bid to host the programme, French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin says according to Reuters.

"We have to have ITER, even if we do it ourselves," Raffarin said. "The Europeans could do it, possibly with Canada. We won't let go of this. We're in a negotiation phase and we're determined."

Although the stakes are high and the times of negotiations are stressed such statements may endanger the years of preparation, the present re-evaluation and the years of work ahead.

The response from the French Prime Minister comes after the U.S. last week publicly announced support for the Japanese site to host ITER. In his visit to Japan, U.S. Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham said "I am proud to say today that the United States strongly supports building ITER here in Japan. From a technical standpoint you offer the superior site."

Today the U.S. Ambassador to Japan confirmed the U.S. backing of ITER in Japan as he highlighted the strengthened risk sharing on new ventures and between Japan and the United States in the Asahi Shimbun.

The Japanese Minister of Science is also said to be touring China and Russia to gain support for ITER to be located in Japan.

Following the U.S. announcement of support for the Japanese site, the EU Commissioner of Research P. Busquin in a communication through AFP said that "It is inappropriate and inopportune to make such declarations at a time when there is a process of evaluation (for the competing bids) going on."

It is at present unclear if the French Prime Minister speaks on his own behalf or if he speaks on behalf of the European Union. Ireland has just taken over the EU Presidency and the Irish government has said it will work to make progress on financing and organisational issues relating to the establishment of ITER, and on wider international aspects.

The French Prime Minister may however be pressed domestically as it appears in a Le Monde article that French scientists threatens to leave France for better paid jobs abroad. According to the article "The government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin runs the risk of France becoming, in 10 or 15 years' time, absent or marginalised in [scientific] fields where Japan, the United States and later China and India will reign supreme."

A decision on where to locate ITER was not reached in late December of last year at a meeting in Washington. The ITER parties are expected to meet on neutral grounds, possible in Vienna, in mid February to reach a decision.

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