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France says Europe could make ITER reactor itself

PARIS, Jan 12 (Reuters) - Europe could build a disputed experimental nuclear fusion reactor on its own if the multinational joint venture promoting it decided to give the contract to Japan, France said on Monday.

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, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin told journalists. The United States, in a move seen in Paris as a bid to punish it for opposing the U.S.-led war in Iraq, has backed the remote northern Japanese fishing village of Rokkasho as ITER's site against Cadarache, near Marseille in southern France.

"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."

At the same time, the Europeans were still ready to work with the United States, he said, without giving any details.

France has suggested the project -- which aims at generating energy the same way as the sun does -- could be split in two, with the reactor located in Cadarache but data analysis done elsewhere.

At a meeting in Washington on December 20, the six members of the ITER joint venture failed to reach agreement, with the United States and South Korea backing Japan, while Russia and China favoured France.

Japan's science minister plans to visit South Korea, Russia and China this week to try to win backing for Tokyo's bid to host the programme.

Nuclear fusion has been touted as a solution to the world's energy problems, as it would be low in pollution and could theoretically use seawater as fuel. Fusion involves sticking atomic particles together, as opposed to today's nuclear reactors and weapons, which produce energy by splitting atoms apart. Fifty years of research, however, have failed to produce a commercially viable fusion reactor.

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