

Alerting Humanitarians to Emergencies

Japan warns EU against unilateral reactor move

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TOKYO, March 9 (Reuters) - Japan warned the European Union on Wednesday against starting to build the world's first nuclear fusion reactor, saying such a unilateral move would backfire.

The two sides are competing over a multi-billion-dollar project to host the reactor. "It is a question of whether we should regard the project as a simple material object or a framework for international cooperation," Satoru Ohtake, director of fusion energy at the Science and Technology Ministry, told Reuters. "If they were to do that on their own, what they would lose would be huge ... Why should only Japan make a concession?"

In Brussels on Monday, European Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik said the EU wanted to start building the reactor by the end of 2005 with or without an international agreement.

"I intend to pursue a six-party agreement until the last possible moment," Potocnik said in a statement after briefing EU research and industry ministers.

"I am at the same time determined that the solution including the highest possible number of parties should be found soon, that is in due time to allow construction to start before the end of this year."

Six partners are involved in the quest to construct the first thermonuclear reactor -- the European Union, Japan, China, the United States, Russia and South Korea.

Japan's close security ally, the United States, and South Korea have supported building the reactor in Rokkasho, a Japanese fishing village, but EU sources believe they would back a move to construct it in Cadarache, France, if Tokyo stepped aside. Ohtake reiterated that Japan's September proposal for the reactor project was superior to that of the EU.

"The EU's argument does not excel our offer," he said, without elaborating on the Japanese proposal. "But we should continue our negotiations."

He said it was too early to hold high-level political talks to resolve the simmering dispute. The EU had called on Japan to hold such discussions to reach an early compromise.

"We are trying to host the project not for money or economic reasons. We believe it's meaningful to bring the project -- a centrepiece of global science -- to Japan or Asia," he said.

Nuclear fusion has been touted as a long-term solution to the world's energy problems, as it would be low on pollution and use sea water as fuel. But 50 years of research have so far failed to produce a commercially viable fusion reactor.

Construction of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) is forecast to cost some 4.6 billion euros (\$6.14 billion) over 10 years. The EU intends to cover 40 percent of that from its budget while France has proposed doubling its contribution to 20 percent of the costs.

Including a development phase, the ITER project is forecast to last 30 years at an overall cost of 10 billion euros. (\$1=.7491 euro)

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