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Russia says 'no' to nuclear fusion plant in Japan

MOSCOW, Jan 15 (Reuters) - Russia on Thursday declined Japanese pleas to back Tokyo's bid to host a disputed nuclear fusion reactor as the global contest for the multi-billion project threatened to hurt relations among the participants.

Japan and France are vying for the right to build the world's first such reactor, but the six members of the joint venture have so far failed to agree on the site. The plant would generate energy the same way the sun does.

Russia and China favour the French site of Cadarache. South Korea and the United States -- in a move seen in Paris as a bid to punish it for opposing the U.S.-led war in Iraq -- back Japan's fishing village of Rokkasho.

Japanese Science Minister Takeo Kawamura was in Moscow on Thursday for closed-door talks with Russia's nuclear top brass, but was given a firm 'no' mixed with diplomatic politeness from the Russian side, a source in Russia's Atomic Energy Ministry said.

"Our position is clear. They haven't been able to convince us, although we were really nice to them today," the source told Reuters after talks between Kawamura and Russian Atomic Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev.

"The French site is cheaper and thus more acceptable."

The decision on the \$12 billion project, due to be taken by consensus among the participants of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), has been postponed until February.

Russia's staunch refusal could undermine the recently warming relations between Moscow and Tokyo. The two countries remain technically at war, with Russia refusing Japan's demand to return four small islands in the Far East seized in the final days of World War Two.

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 existing nuclear reactors and weapons which produce energy by splitting atoms apart. Fifty years of research have so far failed to produce a commercially viable fusion reactor.

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