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EU Says It Could Go It Alone On Fusion Reactor

By Ahto Lobjakas, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

A European Commission spokesman said yesterday that the EU has the resources in money and scientific knowhow to build independently an experimental nuclear fusion reactor. Two nations -- France and Japan -- presently are competing for the site of such a reactor. RFE/RL reports that their competition is placing severe strains on an effort at international technological cooperation.

Brussels, 14 January 2004 (RFE/RL) -- The lure of the technological Holy Grail of boundless, non-polluting energy has placed immense strain on what had been a cooperative international effort to build the world's first nuclear fusion reactor.

The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor coalition, known as ITER, formed in 1987. It was a remarkable attempt at international technological cooperation. Current members of ITER are the European Union, Japan, China, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

Scientists believe that nuclear fusion may prove to be the ultimate solution to world energy needs. Unlike nuclear fission, which releases energy by splitting atoms, fusion forces atoms together and releases vast energy safely and without troublesome byproducts like radiation and nuclear waste. Fusion is the energy that powers the sun and the stars.

ITER members began negotiations in 2001 to determine where the reactor would be built, how it would be paid for and how it would be managed and operated. Canada, France, Spain, and Japan offered sites. Two candidates now remain.

The ITER consortium currently is assessing the two proposals for the reactor site. One, backed by the EU, Russia, and China, is in Caradache, France. The other, is in Rokkasho-mura, Japan. The United States recently announced its support for Rokkasho-mura as, in the U.S. view, superior to the conditions on offer in France. South Korea backs the U.S. stance. The ITER has scheduled the decision to be made in February

French Prime Minister Pierre Raffarin on 12 January raised the heat in the debate. He said that he believes the EU should go ahead with the project with or without the backing of the United States.

Now comes European Commission spokesman, Fabio Fabbi, who said yesterday that the EU could build the reactor on its own, if necessary.

"We think it is scientifically and technically feasible. Financially, as you know, the cost of the construction and amendment phases is 10 billion euros [\$12.7 billion], so it's not impossible, but of course it's a significant amount of money," Fabbi said.

News agencies report that France suspects that U.S. support for Japan may be, at least in part, an effort to punish France for its opposition to the Iraq war.

Fabbi said yesterday that the EU will abide by the decision of the consortium in February. He denied that political considerations will determine the EU's position. But, he added, the commission -- the EU's executive body -- is convinced that the French proposal outscores the Japanese offer on technical merit. Scientists believe that nuclear fusion may prove to be the ultimate solution to world energy needs.

He added one more, possibly very significant point. He said that any ITER decision must be reached by consensus, that is, EU affirmation will be essential.

"As you know, back in December, in Washington on 20 December, when the last meeting of the international consortium took place, a decision was taken -- well, first of all -- not to decide: to postpone the decision [until] later in 2004, namely mid-February 2004, and to take the decision, if possible, by consensus. So, not to vote [to settle] the issue, [but] to find a consensual agreement," Fabbi said.

In a move that could set a precedent for the EU response, Canada pulled out of the ITER last December after its proposal to locate the reactor in Ontario was rejected.

Canada, of course, did not go on to speak of proceeding with an independent project. An EU



Good call.

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official, speaking privately, suggested yesterday that the EU has what he called "the critical mass" of finance and technology to go it alone. He also said the EU already has made plans that look beyond the building of the reactor.

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