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FRANCE LIKELY TO WIN BATTLE WITH JAPAN OVER NUCLEAR FUSION SITE: MINISTER

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CADARACHE, France, Oct 1 (AFP) - France's minister for research on Thursday expressed optimism that his country would win the battle with Japan, the United States and South Korea for the siting of a high-tech nuclear fusion research project.

"Given the situation today, it's Cadarache," said Deputy Research Minister Francois d'Aubert, referring to the site proposed by France for the 10-billion-euro (12-billion-dollar) International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER).

If a dispute with the United States, South Korea and Japan, which proposes the Japanese site of Rokkasho-mura, is not resolved before, the European Union is expected to decide on November 25 to start construction at Cadarache, in southeastern France.

"There can always be unexpected developments," said d'Aubert. "There is of course a political angle, and that could change things. But frankly... we are on the right track," he said, during a visit to Cadarache.

He added that whichever of the two countries did not get the potentially lucrative site could be compensated. "There can't be a loser for ITER," he said. "If Cadarache is chosen, there can be compensations for the site that was not chosen."

The EU has said it is keen to go on working within the international ITER framework, which also embraces China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States.

The United States and South Korea support the Japanese site, while China and Russia have backed the EU bid for the reactor to be sited at Cadarache.

The project aims to build the world's first working prototype reactor for nuclear fusion, which is billed as a clean, safe, inexhaustible energy source for the future.

Wrangling over the decision is expected to focus on a meeting of the six ITER partners in Vienna in mid-October, hosted by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

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