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France Won't Build Reactor Without Accord, Japan Official Says

June 8 (Bloomberg) -- France probably will not start building a 4.6 billion-euro (\$5.7 billion) experimental nuclear-fusion reactor on its soil unless an agreement is reached with the other countries involved, a Japanese government official said.

``It's hard to imagine France building the reactor without first reaching an agreement with ourselves and the other countries participating in this project," Takahiro Hayashi, deputy director of the office of fusion energy in Japan's ministry of education and science, said in a telephone interview today.

Japan and France are deadlocked over which gets to host the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, or ITER, project. The European Union said last November it would start the project in France this year with or without the support of Japan, the U.S. and South Korea who favor construction in Japan. The EU is seeking to reach an accord with Japan by offering it a ``privileged partnership" in the project.

``Honestly, we wouldn't be satisfied with just a partnership role," Hayashi said.

The EU aims for an agreement with Japan at a planned meeting in Moscow tentatively scheduled for June 28. Russia and China, which support France as the project's host, and the U.S. and South Korea would be represented along with the EU and Japan at the ministerial gathering.

``We hope this could be the decisive meeting" for a six-party agreement supporting France as the site of the project, EU Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik told reporters in Luxembourg yesterday. In March, Potocnik gave Japan until the end of June to accept the special, non-host role in the ITER project.

Rival Sites

France has proposed Cadarache as the site for the reactor that would generate ``clean" energy by fusing together light atoms such as hydrogen. Japan has put forward Rokkasho village in the northern prefecture of Aomori. The EU committed itself to starting construction in Cadarache in 2005 -- a step that requires up to six months of preparation.

``Japan is going to do its best until the very end to ensure ITER is built in Rokkasho," Hayashi said.

ITER is expected to cost a total of about 10 billion euros including operating expenses over 35 years.

``We have reached a common understanding on the host and non-host roles" and ``the preparations on the technical level are going well," Potocnik said yesterday without elaborating. ``We can remain optimistic."

The 25-nation EU's privileged-partnership offer would involve a bigger role for Japan in building ITER, managing the project and receiving research contracts from it, officials at the European Commission, the EU's Brussels-based executive arm, said last year.

Such a partnership would also ensure that activities needed to exploit nuclear fusion would be linked to the research, hastening commercial use, Potocnik said in April. The offer would cover ``materials, production and things needed to stimulate the overall project," he said at the time.

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