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Title : Chirac seeks deal with Japan to break deadlock on nuclear project
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TOKYO: French President Jacques Chirac said that the European Union hoped for an agreement soon to let Japan take part in a revolutionary nuclear project as both parties agreed to step up dialogue.

Talks have been deadlocked for months on where to build the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), with the European Union threatening to go it alone if Japan does not drop its bid.

"France along with Europe hope for Japan's participation as part of the international cooperation on ITER," Chirac said on a visit to Tokyo.

"I have no doubt that an agreement on this issue can be found quickly between the European Union and Japan," he told a seminar on sustainable development organized by the Nikkei financial press group.

Speaking at the same event, Taizo Nishimuro, chairman of electronics giant Toshiba, said he heard a deal could be reached in April.

"I understand that Japan and France will work together to come to a conclusion in a meeting next month," Nishimuro said.

"I know Japanese engineers who can speak the best French are those in the field of nuclear science. They have full understanding of the goings on in France," he said.

ITER, which would emulate the sun's nuclear fusion, is designed to one day generate inexhaustible supplies of electricity, but is not expected to be operational before 2050.

The United States and South Korea support Japan's offer to build ITER in Rokkasho-mura, a northern Japanese village near the Pacific Ocean, while China and Russia back the EU bid for the southern French town of Cadarache.

European Union leaders at a March 23 meeting in Brussels said they would go ahead with construction in Cadarache and gave Japan until July to agree.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, after talks Sunday with Chirac, said Japan "has no intention to withdraw its bid to invite ITER."

A Japanese foreign ministry official said Koizumi and Chirac agreed in principle for an EU delegation to visit Japan before April 18, when the Europeans will hold a new crucial meeting on ITER in Brussels.

"Japan and France have had fruitful cooperation for more than a quarter century on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. We want this cooperation to continue, including through the ITER program," Chirac said in an interview with the Tokyo Shimbun newspaper published Monday.

Chirac said without further detail that Tokyo had made "constructive proposals" which would designate a sharing of responsibilities between the country which hosts the ITER reactor and the

other.

Satoru Ohtake, chief of the Office of Fusion Energy, which handles the ITER issue at the Japanese science and technology ministry, said he did not believe Koizumi and Chirac came "to a new, fresh conclusion per se."

"They have agreed to continue our discussions in search for an answer. They reiterated that they will take the path that we have been taking," Ohtake told AFP.

"We are still negotiating the issue and we want to come to a conclusion that is mutually beneficial," he said.

"What the summit did was to reconfirm the method that we have been taking and to continue the ongoing dialogue."

- AFP

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