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EU Says Feasible to Go It Alone on ITER Reactor

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BRUSSELS, Belgium (Reuters) - The European Union said on Tuesday it would be technically possible for Europe to go it alone in building a disputed experimental nuclear fusion reactor if Japan beats France to the international contract.

The two countries have bid for the \$12 billion International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) and Paris has said Europe could go on its own if a multinational joint venture decided to give the contract to Japan.

A European Commission spokesman said it was technically and scientifically possible for Europe to build the reactor itself, as suggested by French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin on Monday, but he also highlighted the costs of building ITER. "It is not impossible, but is of course a significant amount of money," Commission research spokesman Fabio Fabbi said.

The United States, in a move seen in Paris as a bid to punish it for opposing the U.S.-led war in Iraq, has backed the remote northern Japanese fishing village of Rokkasho as ITER's site against Cadarache, near Marseille in southern France.

The six members of the ITER joint venture failed in December to agree on a site with the United States and South Korea backing Japan, while China and Russia favor the French site.

The decision, which is to be taken by consensus, was postponed until mid-February after an evaluation of the sites.

Fabbi told a daily news conference that if a consensus was reached in favor of Rokkasho, the EU would accept the decision. But he added that the bloc continued to believe that Cadarache was the better site for the project.

Japan's science minister plans to visit South Korea, Russia and China this week to seek backing for Tokyo's bid.

France has suggested the project, which aims at generating energy the same way as the sun does, could be split in two, with the reactor located in Cadarache but data analysis elsewhere.

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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