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EU warns of breakaway plans on nuclear project

24 September 2004

The European Union is pushing increasingly hard for an accord on the site for a landmark nuclear energy project, while treading carefully to avoid a fallout with global partners on the plans, notably Japan.

But in a sign of the growing tension over the decision, long-time chief EU negotiator Philippe Busquin has warned the EU should start to study the possibility of launching its own project, diplomats say.

The bloc's Dutch presidency is seeking to settle the disagreement over the location of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), the world's first prototype nuclear fusion reactor, by the end of November.

The EU and Japan are competing to host ITER, aimed to be a test-bed for what is being billed as a clean, safe, inexhaustible energy source of the future.

Japan is sticking to a six-party framework to build the project -- which is backed by South Korea, China, the United States and Russia as well as the EU.

But the European bloc wants to build the reactor in the southern French town of Cadarache, near Marseille, and has won support from China and Russia.

South Korea and the United States appear to prefer the Japanese site, in the northern village of Rokkasho-mura.

The suggestion by Busquin -- who recently stood down as EU research commissioner -- that the EU could go it alone is clouding the discussions.

In a letter to the Dutch EU presidency before he left the commission at the start of September, he notably stressed that "several partners have a very strong preference" for the French site, and "would support an initiative by the EU to unblock the situation".

According to one EU source, China and Russia could join the European project, and other interested countries such as Canada and India would also be welcome

The project could be launched without digging into EU funds, he added.

That is a key demand of Germany and Britain, as well as the Dutch. France has proposed to double its contribution to some 914 million euros (1.1 billion dollars), or about 20 percent of the estimated cost of 4.7 billion euros.

French Research Minister Francois d'Aubert wrote to the EU presidency on September 11 setting out the details of the alternative funding proposals.

He argued the project could be launched with Russia paying 10 percent of the costs and China a further 10 percent. Other partners could be invited to contribute to costs too, he said.

But a spokesman for Louis Michel, who has replaced Busquin as commissioner, said Thursday the EU still had hopes of reaching a deal with the other partners, and notably Japan.

"We think there is still a possibility of reaching an agreement with the five other partners," said spokesman Fabio Fabbi in Brussels.

And the EU's presidency appears cautious. "We are doing everything we can diplomatically to reach a decision which would still include all our partners," said a Dutch diplomat.

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

But before any decision to go it alone, sources say the EU is keen to await the outcome of the US presidential elections at the start of November, which could influence Washington's position on the project.

ITER - International Fusion Energy Organisation

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