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Japan confident of winning colossal nuclear fusion project

28 January 2004

A Japanese site will accommodate the ITER experimental nuclear reactor project if its technological merits and the importance of locating such a major project in Asia are fairly assessed, the country's science minister said Wednesday.

"I have no doubt that the Japanese site will be chosen if a fair assessment is made from a scientific and technological viewpoint," said Takeo Kawamura, minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology.

ITER, or the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, aims to test technology for nuclear fusion, billed as the clean, safe, inexhaustible energy source of the future.

The European Union, the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia are to vote in late February on whether the French town of Cadarache or the northern Japanese village of Rokkasho-mura should host the 10-billion-dollar project.

They failed to decide on the site at a meeting in December, with Japan drawing backing from the United States and South Korea, while France won support from China and Russia.

While arguing "the odds are in favour of us", Kawamura said Japan and France could discuss the possibility of sharing the project by siting the actual reactor site in one country and an information centre in the other.

He said no detailed debate on compromise plans had taken place.

Kawamura said "the most excellent point for Rokkasho-mura is its transport capability", arguing extra care must be taken in bringing in huge and heavy components into the host country from other nations.

He said the reactor site would be less than five kilometres (three miles) from an existing major port, compared with 100 kilometres between Cadarache and the port of Marseilles.

Earlier this month, the US publicly backed Japan for the first time to host the experimental reactor, saying it offered a superior site.

Toichi Sakata, chief of the science ministry's research development division, said "it is clear that the United States is very much concerned about the transport capabilities of Cadarache".

The minister also stressed the importance of Asia playing a greater role in scientific fields.

"So far most international collaboration projects have concentrated in Western countries," he said.

"The ITER project has made for the very first time an Asian country volunteer to host such a project," he said, adding Japan would prove that an Asian host could be as good as a Western host.

Kawamura toured South Korea, Russia and China this month to muster support for Japan's bid.

ITER - International Fusion Energy Organisation - further information

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