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Japan anger over French nuclear project

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - The EU says it will do its utmost to include Japan in a project to build a nuclear fusion reactor in France, but suggestions the EU may eventually leave Tokyo out drew angry reactions from Japan.

The plan to build the world's first thermonuclear reactor is sponsored by six partners -- the European Union, Japan, China, the United States, Russia and South Korea, but the EU and Japan are competing against each other to host the reactor.

EU ministers meeting on Friday agreed to continue seeking Japan's backing to build the reactor in France and said they would strive to get the support of all partners in the project.

EU officials said the EU was hoping to clinch a deal by year end and may consider going ahead without Tokyo if talks failed.

"This is not an ultimatum, but we wish to reach a political agreement before the end of the year," French Research Minister Francois D'Aubert told a news briefing.

"If the negotiations do not come to a rapid conclusion, the Commission has the possibility to choose a different path."

Japan said it would pursue its bid to host the project and warned the EU against a unilateral move to go ahead without it.

"It is regrettable that they are talking about taking unilateral action," Satoru Ohtake, director for fusion energy at the Science and Technology Ministry, told Reuters. "There is no change in Japan's policy to seek to host the project."

NO UNILATERAL ACTION

EU officials said there was no talk of unilateral action, stressing the EU wanted support for the 10 billion euro project from all partners, including Japan.

"Given the global importance of fusion research, the project should involve the broadest possible number of partners," Dutch Research Minister Maria van der Hoeve, who chaired EU research talks in Brussels, told a news conference.

The EU ministers set no official deadline for the talks, to be handled by the EU's executive Commission, although the Dutch Presidency wants a solution by the end of December.

If no deal was reached, the EU would consider pressing ahead to build the reactor in Cadarache, France, with as many partners as possible, EU officials said.

"This is a solution of last resort," said one.

The European Union wants to offer Tokyo a privileged partner role in the mammoth nuclear fusion research plan to compensate for not building it in Japan, officials said.

Energy by nuclear fusion would be low on pollution, using sea water as fuel. But 50 years of research have so far failed to produce a commercially viable fusion reactor.

Last week, the Commission suggested offering Japan a package of incentives so Tokyo would drop its bid to host the reactor.

But Japan reacted angrily to this, accusing the EU of being high-handed in the negotiations. EU officials said the United States had also expressed concern at the EU's approach.

Diplomats say the EU offer might include creating a fusion institute in Japan worth one billion euros for pre-research activity, on the condition Japan raised its financial contribution to the reactor.

Construction of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) is forecast to cost some 4.6 billion euros over a 10-year period. The EU intends to cover 40 percent of that while France has proposed doubling its contribution to 20 percent.

Including a development phase, the ITER project is forecast to last 30 years at an overall cost of 10 billion euros.

The United States and South Korea have previously supported the site at Rokkasho, a Japanese fishing village, but EU sources believe they would back Cadarache if Tokyo stepped aside.

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