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JAPAN 'CONSIDERING PROTEST' OVER CHIRAC STATEMENT ON NUCLEAR PROJECT

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TOKYO, May 6 (AFP) - Japan has not given up its bid to host a pioneering nuclear reactor and is considering a formal protest over remarks by President Jacques Chirac claiming it will go to France, the science ministry said Friday.

Japan and France are both vying to play host to the 10-billion euro International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), a revolutionary nuclear reactor which would emulate the sun's nuclear fusion process.

On Wednesday, Chirac told French television that France was "on the verge of getting ITER sited at Cadarache" in southern France, and the remarks angered the Japanese science ministry.

"We are considering lodging a protest through diplomatic channels with France over the president's remarks," Toichi Sakata, a senior official at the science ministry told AFP. "His remarks were inappropriate," he added.

"The issue of deciding the ITER site has yet to be resolved. We are in the middle of negotiations," said Sakata, who is in Japan's negotiating team over the nuclear project.

He said Chirac's remarks were "unilateral", arguing that the president's comments "certainly would not work positively for the current negotiations".

At a meeting in Geneva Thursday, Japanese and EU officials struck a deal that maps out future cooperation over ITER, the French government said, paving the way for a long-awaited decision on where the nuclear reactor will be built.

The United States and South Korea support Japan's offer to build ITER in Rokkasho-mura, northern Japan, while the European Union, China and Russia back France's bid for the project in Cadarache.

Talks over choosing the ITER site have been long deadlocked, but local reports said this week that Tokyo would likely concede the project in exchange for getting preferential contracts and more jobs for Japanese researchers.

But Sakata dismissed the reports, saying Japan had no plans to withdraw from the competition.

"There is no change in our policy to bring the ITER project to Rokkasho-mura. We are not considering giving up on ITER at all," he said.

Akira Chiba, assistant press secretary at the Japanese foreign ministry, also told reporters: "We are still negotiating with the EU and no conclusion has been made on the issue yet."

ITER is designed to generate inexhaustible supplies of electricity but is not expected to be operational before 2050.

The budget for ITER is projected to be 10 billion euros (13 billion dollars) over the next 30 years, including 4.7 billion euros to build the reactor alone.

If Rokkasho-mura won the ITER site, Japan would have to pay between 600 billion and 800 billion yen (5.8 billion and 7.7 billion dollars) over a 30-year period, according to the Asahi Shimbun daily.

Some finance and trade ministry officials here have voiced concern over the huge financial burden associated with ITER, saying such big expenditures could have a negative impact on the budgets of other science and technology projects.

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