

Decision on nuclear fusion site put off

Down to two competing sites.

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Six parties involved in a \$12 billion, 30-year energy project failed Saturday to reach an accord on the venue for the world's first prototype nuclear fusion reactor due to a sharp division over the two rival sites in Japan and France.

Representatives from China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, the United States and the European Union instead agreed to work out a compromise by the end of January and try to hold a fence-mending meeting in early February.

"We have two excellent sites for ITER (the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor), so excellent in fact that we need further evaluation before making our decisions based on consensus," said a joint communique issued by the six parties after their minister-level meeting just outside Washington.

"With this information, we plan to hold a follow up ministerial meeting to reach consensus quickly, likely to be in February," the communique said.

Japan has proposed hosting the project in the village of Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, while the EU has selected the southern French town of Cadarache as its candidate.

Announcing the joint communique, Werner Burkart, deputy director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said, "I hope

Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiroyuki Hosoda, who represented Japan at the meeting, said, "The six parties were divided into equal halves."

While avoiding citing specific countries, Hosoda, who was formerly state minister in charge of science and technology, said two supported Japan and two threw their support behind the EU bid.

According to conference participants, South Korea and the U.S. expressed support for Japan's bid, while China and Russia rallied behind France.

The failure to reach an agreement came amid a sensitive and complicated geopolitical situation.

Japan has supported the U.S.-led war in Iraq and reconstruction efforts there, while France and many EU members as well as China and Russia have opposed the U.S. invasion and occupation.

China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the U.S., meanwhile, are cooperating in resolving the standoff over North Korea's nuclear issue.

Rokkasho, roughly 600 km north of Tokyo and near the northernmost tip of Honshu, is already the site of a uranium enrichment plant, and a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant is scheduled to be completed there by 2006.

Among EU members, meanwhile, Spain initially fielded Vandellós in the northeastern Catalonia region as an ITER venue, but EU ministers chose Cadarache, near Marseille, as a united European front in November to compete with the Japanese bid.

Some officials from Aomori Prefecture attended the meeting to lobby for the project.

ITER, meaning "the way" in Latin, is aimed at creating the world's first sustained nuclear fusion reaction, which is similar to the energy-producing process in the sun.

Nuclear fusion involves sticking atoms together, unlike the splitting of an atom that is at the heart of nuclear fission, the process used in current nuclear power plants and weapons.

Proponents say fusion power would be safe and cause little pollution, serving as an effective tool to help prevent global warming from emissions of greenhouse gases.

Under the project, the construction of an experimental nuclear fusion reactor will start in 2004 with its operation scheduled to begin in 2014. After operating for 20 years, the reactor will be dismantled.

Japan has said Rokkasho has many nuclear-related facilities and offers access to a port and ample sea and fresh water necessary for nuclear fusion. France has cited frequent earthquakes in Japan as one of the Japanese proposal's drawbacks.

Japanese officials, meanwhile, said Cadarache lacks access to a nearby port and there may be difficulties in transporting large equipment to the site.