

GREEN ACTION

グリーン・アクション

Press Release

24 February, 2009

Kyoto, Japan

(Green Action is a Japanese NGO based in Kyoto, Japan)

Largest Plutonium Sea Transport Could Pass Near Your Country SAFETY OF TRANSPORT NOT ASSURED

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Secret preparations are underway in Britain and France for shipping 1.8 tons of plutonium, the largest quantity of plutonium ever shipped by sea.

The plutonium is contained in 65 assemblies of MOX (mixed plutonium and uranium oxide) fuel and is being shipped to Japan for use in the nuclear power plants of three Japanese electric utilities. No details have been revealed, but it is reported that the fuel will be transported by two British-flagged vessels, escorting each other.

The vessels are to depart Europe anytime on or after March 1st. Neither the hour of departure nor the maritime route to be used will be revealed before the ships depart. The United States must approve the transport plan before the shipment can proceed.

The MOX fuel to be transported has been fabricated in France by Areva NC.

AREVA NC statement on the shipment:

<http://www.lahague.aveva-nc.fr/scripts/aveva-nc/publigen/content/templates/Show.asp?P=8317&L=EN>

The three possible routes for the shipment are around the Cape of Good Hope and through the South Pacific, around South America, or, through the Panama Canal.

Japanese electric utilities hope the fuel to be shipped will start its troubled MOX fuel utilization program which was to begin a decade ago in 1999. Many more shipments are scheduled to follow and could take different routes.

The shipment is a threat to the security, safety, and environment of countries en route. It lacks adequate security to protect against terrorists, and there is no emergency contingency plan made in consultation with maritime authorities of en route states. The shipment lacks an adequate liability and compensation regime, and there is no commitment to salvage the material if it goes overboard.

Aileen Mioko Smith, executive director of Green Action based in Kyoto, Japan stated, "Countries potentially on the route of this shipment should seek a moratorium on such nuclear shipments because neither the Japanese government nor electric utilities are giving countries the proper assurance that the plutonium can be shipped safely."

The hazard of shipping radioactive material by sea is very real. Eleven years ago in 1997, a ship, the MSC Carla, carrying highly radioactive cesium was split in two in a storm in the Atlantic Ocean. The radioactive cargo sank 3,000 meters to the bottom of the ocean. French regulatory authorities acknowledged the containers would rupture but said they would not salvage them.

The MOX shipment's transport casks are only required to withstand emersion underwater at 15 meters for 8 hours (or 200 meters for 30 minutes). The cask must withstand a 9-meter drop. The material must not distort to the extent it leads to an uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction. Japanese electric utilities have not undertaken the drop-test experiment in accordance to Japanese government regulations. Japanese Diet members are objecting to this.

Section Chief Masato Mori, the MLIT (ministry of transport) official in charge of the MOX shipment's transport cask safety stated on 13 February, **“The Japanese transport ministry is not the party which is fully in charge of this transport. The primary party responsible is the [Japanese] electric utilities. We've told them time and time again that they should put more effort into the safety of sea transports, just like they put into the safety of their nuclear power plants. As far as we are concerned, they can put much, much more effort into the safety of the sea transports.”**

Japanese government authorities, nevertheless state the shipment can go forward.

Plutonium is an essential ingredient of nuclear weapons. Less than 8 kilograms is enough to construct a nuclear bomb. IAEA safeguards define fresh MOX fuel as plutonium and therefore stringent physical-protection measures must apply.

In 1992, the Akatsuki Maru transported 1.7 tons of plutonium from France to Japan for use in Japan's prototype fast breeder reactor, Monju. Dozens of countries raised concerns about this shipment. Two MOX fuel shipments from Europe to Japan followed in 1999 and 2001, also heavily protested by en route States. Not one atom of the plutonium shipped in 1992, 1999 and 2001 has been used in Japan due to nuclear power plant accidents, data falsification scandals, and Japanese local opposition to MOX fuel use.

Regional organizations which have protested past Japanese nuclear shipments include CARICOM (Caribbean Community), ACP(African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, SIDS (Small Island Developing States), and PIF (Pacific Islands Forum).

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