COUNTDOWN TO A DEADLY SHIPMENT

The countdown to one of the most controversial nuclear shipments in history began on April 26th 2002 when two armed British merchant ships set sail from the UK bound for Japan.

These two ships are part of a deadly trade in plutonium between the UK, Japan and France. This trade is feeding a potential nuclear bomb programme in Japan and increasing the risk of international terrorism against nuclear transports and facilities. The trade is also increasing the radioactive contamination of the environment, has a history of accidents, lies and cover-ups of nuclear safety and is proceeding in defiance of international law.

The plutonium trade is thus fueling global insecurity and risking the lives of countless millions of people around the planet. It is only through concerted international opposition and protest by the world's people, politicians and governments that this plutonium terror can be stopped.

Pacific Pintail leaving Barrow, UK, to pick up rejected plutonium MOX material from Japan.

The two ships, Pacific Pintail and Pacific Teal, left the UK on the anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, (26th April) bound for to Japan to pick up rejected plutonium MOX (mixed oxide) material, which contains 255 kilograms (kg) of weapons-usable plutonium. This is enough plutonium to build 50 nuclear bombs.

Plutonium MOX – A deadly scandal

The shipment is being made because the manufacturers of the plutonium MOX, British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL), deliberately falsified crucial safety data about the production of the first ever plutonium fuel shipped to Japan in October 1999. Subsequently, BNFL openly lied to the Japanese government and the world's media and public by claiming that no falsification had taken place. It was only because of legal action taken by Japanese environmental groups and Greenpeace that BNFL were forced to admit that they had falsified the data. Japan then demanded that the plutonium be returned to the UK.

BNFL and the UK Government hope that the return of the plutonium MOX will repair their relationship with Japan and enable them to secure new nuclear contracts with Japan which could result in shipping more than 25,000 kilograms of plutonium in MOX fuel to Japan over the next ten years – up to 80 shipments between Europe and Japan.

BNFL are the main owners and operators of the armed nuclear cargo ships with which they plan to undertake the hazardous 30,000km return voyage. The whole scandal has shown that the nuclear industry cannot be trusted. People in countries along the potential shipment routes should be very concerned that such a discredited and dangerous company as BNFL is in charge of the safety of the deadly shipment. No one is safe from the plutonium industry.

Heading For a Coast Near You

The route of the return plutonium MOX shipment from Japan to the UK remains secret but is likely to be one of three possible options:

- via the Pacific, Panama Canal, Caribbean, Atlantic Ocean and Irish Sea
- via the Pacific, Cape Horn, Atlantic Ocean and Irish Sea
- via the Pacific, Tasman Sea, Cape of Good Hope, Atlantic Ocean and Irish Sea.

More than 50 countries along the shipment routes have protested against earlier Japanese plutonium and nuclear waste shipments. Many of these coastal nations will again be put at risk by the shipments but their governments have not been consulted about the route, security arrangements or emergency planning in the case of an accident. Despite the significant risks to the environment and people's health along the transport route, the Japanese, British and French governments and nuclear industry have refused to conduct an international environmental impact assessment.

Already this year Caribbean countries have voiced their "implacable opposition" to nuclear shipments through their region and Latin American countries have also raised objections. During a shipment of MOX to Japan through the Tasman Sea last year, a flotilla of small yachts sailed from Australia and New Zealand to oppose the BNFL vessels. The flotilla protest was supported by the New Zealand Government.

The plutonium shipment is also likely to violate a legal undertaking given by the British Government to the International Law of the Sea Tribunal in November 2001 that that no shipments of plutonium MOX would go in or out of the UK before October 2002. The UK government has been taken to the International Law of the Sea Tribunal by the Irish government who are fighting UK plans of expanding plutonium MOX operations at BNFL's Sellafield nuclear reprocessing facility.

Plutonium MOX today – Japanese nuclear bombs tomorrow?

The terrifying possibility of the Japanese government using its so-called 'civil' plutonium to start a nuclear weapons program was highlighted recently when a senior Japanese politician, Ichiro Ozawa, the leader of the opposition party Jiyuto (Liberal Party), declared that if the military threat posed by China continued to grow: *"It would be so easy for us to produce nuclear warheads - we have plutonium at nuclear power plants in Japan, enough to make several thousand such warheads"*. It seems that Japanese politicians are now making public what many, especially Japan's neighbours, have feared all along about the country's plutonium program.

Greenpeace delivers a mock missile to the Japanese and UK Foreign Ministers in London.

Japan already has sufficient plutonium for more than 7000 nuclear warheads. It has a stockpile of over 38,000 kilograms of plutonium, most of which is stored at nuclear reprocessing plants in France and the UK. This is to be shipped back over the next 10 to 15 years. In total Japan is expected to have more than 45,000kg of plutonium by around 2006-10. It takes as little as 5kg of this plutonium to make one nuclear weapon. The governments and nuclear industries of UK and France have been directly responsible for fuelling this stockpile of bomb usable material. As a result, they are fanning the flames of nuclear proliferation in the highly unstable North-east Asia region.

A floating time-bomb

Even before September 11th, the risk of a terrorist attack on the plutonium shipments was considered a real possibility. If this next shipment goes ahead, for two months its cargo of weapons-usable, highly radiotoxic plutonium material will be on the world's oceans, vulnerable to terrorist attack. The US Department of Energy has stated that *"no one could guarantee the safety of the cargo from a security incident, such as an attack on the vessel by small, fast craft, especially if armed with modern anti-ship missiles."* After September 11th, no scenario should be ruled out.

Because of security fears surrounding the weapons usable plutonium on board, the Pacific Pintail and the Pacific Teal have each been armed with three 30mm cannon and carry nearly 30 armed British nuclear police. As a result, the plutonium cargo is being transported on ships that carry more than seven tonnes of highly explosive ammunition and 1,100 tonnes of fuel oil. This is a lethal combination, making the shipment a floating time-bomb.

In spite of BNFL's claims about the safety of the ships, the Pacific Pintail and the Pacific Teal are structurally inferior to many hazardous cargo carriers and are vulnerable to accidents. Between 1991 and 2000, 19 incidents and accidents have occurred on nuclear cargo ships, including on BNFL's ships. Of the incidents reported, over 25 per cent were given the most serious status of "accident". There were at least five fires, three incidents with fire potential, several collisions and one near miss. In March 2002 one of BNFL's ships used to transport plutonium within European waters, the Atlantic Osprey, caught fire in its engine room and required emergency assistance from land based fire-fighters. Luckily the ship was en route to the Irish Sea for sea trials and was not carrying a nuclear cargo.

The containers for the plutonium MOX fuel are only designed to withstand a fire of 800 degrees centigrade for 30 minutes. According to statistics from the International Maritime Organisation, the average fire on a ship

burns for 23 hours and at temperatures well in excess of 800 degrees. Tests on plutonium MOX fuel have shown that it will start to break down within 15 minutes at temperatures of only 430 degrees centigrade.

An accident involving the release of even a small fraction of the plutonium contained in one of these shipments could have a devastating long-term impact on the environment and people's health, as well as the severe economic consequences for the fishing and tourism industries in any coastal countries affected. Plutonium is radioactive for more than 250,000 years and is a known cancer causing substance.

To demonstrate BNFL's cavalier attitude to safety, the container proposed to be used to transport the plutonium material back to the UK has not yet been licensed by the Japanese authorities. An earlier licence was withdrawn when it was discovered that the expected levels of radioactivity in the cask will be up to twice as high as originally estimated.

Time to Act

Even before September 11, shipments of weapons-usable plutonium between Europe and Japan presented an unacceptable security and environmental threat. Now it is impossible to justify and will create even more dangerous nuclear proliferation, security and environmental risks. The only way forward is to abandon this shipment and stop the international plutonium trade.

Protest at plutonium shipment arrival in Japan, 2001.

While the latest nuclear shipment signals that the nuclear industry continues to disregard the wishes of en-route nations, there is evidence that their opposition is having an impact on the nuclear industry. The commercial plutonium industry is more vulnerable to pressure today than ever before. Growing protest movements against the shipments within Japan and along the transport routes are causing huge political damage to the nuclear industry. It is time to escalate international opposition to make the industry comply with global public and political demands that they stop the dangerous nuclear transports and end nuclear reprocessing.

ACT NOW TO STOP THE PLUTONIUM TERROR.

VISIT THE GREENPEACE WEB SITE www.greenpeace.org **TO FIND OUT HOW TO TAKE ACTION.**