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Barrow-based plutonium ships pass through ‘blacked out’ Panama Canal.

The two Barrow-based nuclear ships Pacific Heron and Pacific Egret, armed with naval canon and carrying security crew, were located transiting the Panama Canal from the Atlantic in the early hours of this morning 6th February. On exiting the Canal, the ships are expected to reach Japan around 29th February where they are likely to load a consignment of 331 kg of plutonium from the Tokai Research Establishment.

Since sailing from Barrow docks on 19th January, the ships’ voyage has been cloaked in a level of secrecy that was raised to new levels last night on their approach to the Canal when the Canal Authorities appear to have bowed to requests/orders to turn off all the webcams during the ships’ transit. The webcams normally operate 24/7 at a handful of locations. With both ships travelling unladen, this extra covert action by officialdom stands as testament to the dangers of nuclear materials transport and the unsavoury nature of global nuclear trade - as does the special dispensation afforded to the ships that allowed them to jump the queue of cargo ships that routinely forms in the anchorage outside the Canal entrance.

With the two ships riding shotgun for each other and with the use of the Panama Canal ruled out by the US Department of Energy, this cargo of prime terrorist material is expected to be transported from Japan round the notoriously unpredictable Cape Horn for safeguarding at the Savannah River nuclear complex in South Carolina under the US-led Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI).

On their departure from Barrow in January having loaded live ammunition for the naval guns and the security crews’ armoury (see CORE’s [Press Release](#) 19/1/16) CORE criticised the shipment as wholly undermining the US safeguard policy by deliberately exposing the prime terrorist material to a lengthy sea transport from Japan to the US during which it will face commonplace maritime risks – and the possibility of hostile acts.

CORE’s spokesman Martin Forwood added today:

‘The ships’ transit through the Panama Canal confirms the validity of our earlier Press Release and we will continue to monitor these plutonium pariahs all the way to the US. Though the level of secrecy afforded to two empty ships - including the black-out of the Panama Canal - is staggering, it is clearly insufficient to keep such transports wholly under wraps and off the chart’.

Director of Savannah River Site Watch Tom Clements has condemned both the import of this plutonium – some of UK origin - which has no clear disposition path out of South Carolina, and the use of the Savannah River site as a general dumping ground for international nuclear wastes.

Both ships were berthed in the Gatun lock system at the Atlantic end of the Canal shortly after midnight (Panama time) this morning and, with a clear run through the system, entered the Pacific at 0230 hrs (0730 UK time). Despite the Canal’s webcams flagged as being ‘temporarily unavailable’, the Pacific Heron and Pacific Egret could be tracked via their Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) which had been switched off ever since leaving Barrow docks. The picture below shows the ships approaching the Canal’s Gatun locks, the Pacific Heron leading the way.



For further information contact CORE on 00-44-1229-716523