

Dry Hall, Broughton Mills, Broughton-in-Furness, Cumbria LA20 6AZ.

Telephone 01229 716523

www.corecumbria.co.uk

UK ships involved in highly contentious plutonium shipment from Japan to the United States.

Barrow ships Pacific Egret and Pacific Heron, moved from the Ramsden Dock nuclear terminal in the early hours of this morning 19th January, sailed from the port on the 7am high tide. Though the destination of the empty ships has not been officially disclosed, the dockside activities around them in the days prior to departure indicate that the ships are bound for Japan where they will pick up a consignment of plutonium for onward shipment to the United States.

The Pacific Egret and Pacific Heron, each fitted with naval canon, are operated by Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd (PNTL) and managed by International Nuclear Services, INS – a wholly owned subsidiary of the NDA. The presence of a heavily armed security squad (provided by the Civil Nuclear Constabulary's Marine Escort Group) on both ships, the earlier loading of stores and the craning on board of live ammunition yesterday points to a long and security-conscious voyage ahead rather than a sunset cruise around Morecambe Bay or routine sea trials in the Irish Sea.

The shipment of plutonium from Japan to the United States falls under the US-led Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI) or M3 – Material Management & Minimisation programme whereby weapons-useable material such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU) is removed from facilities worldwide for safekeeping in the United States. The cargo to be loaded onto the two UK ships in Japan consists of some 331kgs of plutonium from Japan's Tokai Research Establishment. The 331kgs of plutonium – a substantial fraction of which was supplied to Japan by the UK decades ago for 'experimental purposes' in Tokai's Fast Critical Assembly (FCA) - is described by the US Department of Energy (DOE) as 'posing a potential threat to national security, being susceptible to use in an improvised nuclear device, and presenting a high risk of theft or diversion' or, as another US expert puts it 'is sufficient to make up to 40 nuclear bombs'.

Under the US-led programme the plutonium will be transported from Japan to the US port of Charleston and onwards to the Savannah River site in South Carolina. Tom Clements, Director of the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch has roundly condemned and opposed this import of plutonium as a material that will simply be stranded at the site with no clear disposition path out of South Carolina, and as further evidence that Savannah River is being used as a dumping grounds for a host of international nuclear wastes.

CORE's spokesman Martin Forwood said today:

'The claims of shipping this plutonium to the US as a safeguard are completely undermined by deliberately exposing this prime terrorist material to a lengthy sea transport during which it will face the everyday maritime risks and the targeting by those with hostile intentions. Whilst the Barrow ships may have been empty when they left the port today, we condemn their use for such a shipment which we see as being wholly unnecessary and a significant security threat in today's volatile and unpredictable world.'

From DOE documents, this shipment will be the first of a number of planned shipments for what is referred to as 'Gap Material' – weapons usable materials that are not covered under other US or Russian programmes. In total, DOE plans to import up to 900kgs of 'at risk' plutonium currently held in 7 countries via 12 shipments over 7 years. Other materials include stocks of highly enriched uranium (HEU) – the most highly enriched (enriched to 93%) also being supplied to Japan by the UK.

Martin Forwood added

'As with everything the nuclear industry does, there are no good options for dealing with this plutonium and highly enriched uranium. If this material simply must be transported, then whilst the 'least bad' option of leaving them where they are and under maximum security and safety conditions is clearly a non-runner in US thinking, the return to the UK of the UK-supplied material, rather than dumping it in the US, is a principled option that we would support'.

The voyage from Barrow to Japan takes some 6 weeks, and that from Japan to Savannah River over 7 weeks where use of the Panama Canal has been ruled out by DOE in its documents on the shipment. The duration of the whole voyage of well over 3 months appears to rule out the hopes of the plutonium reaching the port of Charleston by the end of March this year when the US Nuclear Security Summit is being held in Washington and at which the arrival of the shipment was hoped to be announced..