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Court blocks nuclear ship from Argentine waters

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An Argentine court ordered the government Wednesday to prevent a British ship carrying nuclear waste from entering waters under its control, arguing it put the country's shoreline at risk from a toxic spill.

The order means the Argentine government must eject the British-owned Pacific Swan if it enters what the court called the country's "jurisdictional" waters.

While environmental group Greenpeace and other sources said "jurisdictional" waters entailed an area 200 miles off the country's shore, Argentina's Foreign Ministry said the vessel had the right to travel up to 12 nautical miles from the shoreline under international shipping agreements.

The court's order was vague in its meaning and was issued in response to a request by the country's ombudsman.

The Pacific Swan, carrying an 80-ton cargo of highly radioactive spent nuclear fuel to Japan, was last spotted by the Argentine navy on Tuesday, approximately 200 miles from shore midway down the country's coast.

Greenpeace, which dubbed the vessel's cargo "the equivalent of a floating Chernobyl," told Reuters it had learned from the Argentine navy that the boat was 190 miles from the shore. A navy spokesman said he could not confirm the report.

If forced to stay more than 200 miles away from the shoreline, the Pacific Swan would have to travel even farther south as it navigates the treacherous waters around Cape Horn.

The shipping of the highly radioactive cargo around the icy tip of South America has alarmed Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile, whose coastlines are all on the route.

The Pacific Swan, which is owned by British Nuclear Fuels, set sail from Cherbourg, France, on Dec. 19 with a cargo of Japanese nuclear reactor waste mixed with glass. The vessel is due to dock in Aomori in northern Japan in February.

Greenpeace fears the passage around Cape Horn could become the preferred route for transporting nuclear waste between Europe and Japan, replacing the traditional, shorter journey through the Panama Canal.

It has sent its own boat full of protesters to monitor the Pacific Swan and ensure it stays out of Argentine waters.

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