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Unnecessary Shipment of Japanese MOX Fuel Threatens the Well-being of En-route Countries

Wednesday, 17 January 2001 CNIC

Tokyo, Japan -- [Tokyo Electric Power Company \(TEPCO\)](#) has announced that the international marine transportation of Japanese mixed uranium-plutonium oxide (MOX) fuel will leave Europe on 19 January 2001 (GMT). The two armed British-flagged vessels, "Pacific Teal" and "Pacific Pintail", will guard each other and transport 28 MOX fuel assemblies to Japan to be used at TEPCO's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa 3 power plant. Past shipments of Japanese nuclear materials went through the following three routes: the Caribbean and Panama, South African and the South Pacific, and around South America. The route will be announced one day after departure, but all three routes could possibly be used. The South American route is currently being used by "Pacific Swan" which is transporting Japanese high-level vitrified radioactive waste. "Pacific Swan" has been met by strong protests from South American countries such as Chile and Argentina.

There is no need to force this transportation of MOX fuel against the protests and concerns of the en-route countries. "This transportation which is part of Japan's plutonium utilization program is not only unnecessary but should not be taking place under any circumstances when the risks of accidents are taken into account" said Hideyuki Ban, Co-director of Citizens' Nuclear Information Center (CNIC) - a Tokyo-based anti-nuclear information center.

Ban said: "The transportation of MOX fuel is a result of the Japanese government and utilities' fixation on pursuing its plutonium policy." Japan has been pursuing plutonium utilization since its initiation of nuclear development, and is one of the few nations still unable to adapt to the world's trend which is turning away from the development of Fast Breeder Reactors (FBRs). In the past, FBR was regarded as the dream nuclear reactor which would produce more plutonium than it consumes as fuel. However, the development was met with great difficulty and even France, which was the only European country left pursuing the development, shut down its demonstration FBR "Superphenix" in 1998.

As of the end of 1999, Japanese plutonium extracted from its spent fuel by British and French reprocessors amounted to about 28 tons. The initial plan was to use the plutonium mainly at FBRs and use some at light water reactors during the transition period from uranium fuel to plutonium fuel use. However, the sodium leak and fire at the Monju prototype FBR in December 1995 gave a serious blow to the program. There have been heated discussions on what to do with Monju which has been shut down since the accident. In any case, no plans currently exist for building a demonstration FBR. As a result, the program to use plutonium in light water reactors, called the "plu-thermal program" in Japan, was introduced. Light water reactors are designed to use uranium fuel and thus various risks are increased when MOX fuel, mixed plutonium and uranium fuel, is used in them. However, this plan has been introduced as a countermeasure to somehow consume the growing stockpile of excess plutonium. "Despite the growing plutonium stockpile, Japan has not abandoned reprocessing, and so it must show the world it has plans to use excess plutonium. This is the sole reason for burning MOX." "Japanese nuclear reactors simply do not require plutonium as a source of fuel," said Ban.

As of January 1997, the Federation of Electric Power Companies (FEPCO) planned to have MOX fuel burned at 16-18 reactors by 2010. However, that plan has already been seriously delayed. The Japanese public's anxiety over nuclear power greatly increased following the JCO criticality accident in the summer of 1999. On the other hand, it was revealed in the same year that data of MOX fuel manufactured for and transported to Japan was falsified. British Nuclear Fuel plc (BNFL) which manufactured MOX fuel for Takahama 3 had falsified the fuel's quality control data. It was later agreed by the two countries that the fuel would be sent back to Britain. Thus, ironically, the MOX fuel which was transported against strong protests and concerns of the en-route countries is going to be shipped back. Furthermore, Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd (PNTL), the shipping company for the imminent MOX fuel transportation and all international marine transportation of Japanese nuclear materials, is a subsidiary of BNFL. Ban said: "How can the en-route countries trust the safety of the shipment when a company that deceives its customers on quality control data is the parent company of the shipper."

Once Pacific Pintail and Pacific Teal leave Europe with the MOX fuel for Japan, together with the Pacific Swan currently transporting Japanese high-level radioactive waste, there will be three ships carrying Japanese nuclear materials sailing between Europe and Japan through international waters. Numerous plans for transportation are lined up to follow these shipments; returning shipment of MOX fuel with falsified data from Japan to Britain, shipment of spent fuel from Tokai I to Britain, and many other shipments of MOX fuel and vitrified high-level nuclear waste from Europe to Japan. Past such shipments have taken place without accurate explanation of risks involved, ample information, or consents from en-route countries. Numerous en-route countries are imposed with risks of radioactive materials because of the shipments of MOX fuel and high-level nuclear waste which are by-products of the collapse of Japan's plutonium policy. Even without a serious accident, these shipments can cause serious damage to the economy of the en-route countries by affecting tourism and businesses related to agricultural and marine products. A comprehensive compensation scheme has yet to be shown to en-route countries for such economic damages. The en-route countries' demands for an end to these shipments are entirely justified in the absence of any rational or practical reasons for Japan to pursue its plutonium program. Ban said: "Considering the fact that already over a hundred shipments of nuclear materials are planned, until the Japanese plutonium policy is put to an end, the world's water will be daily threatened by the transportation of Japanese nuclear materials."

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