

Cruise line called on to take responsibility for toxic cruise ship

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26 July 2006 - In a registered letter(i) sent on 21 July 2006, the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking, representing over a dozen human rights, public health, and environmental organizations from the world over, delivered an ultimatum to Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) president, Mr. Colin Veitch, former owner of the SS Norway (SS Blue Lady, ex-SS France), to buy back the ship, completely decontaminate it of the over 1,200 tonnes of asbestos and unknown quantities of PCBs and other toxins, and to make the vessel available for sale to buyers wishing to re-use it. The coalition of human rights, public health, and environmental organizations threatened to launch a protracted consumer campaign against the cruise line company if it fails to act.

The SS Norway was damaged by an engine room explosion in Florida in 2003. NCL subsequently sent the vessel to Germany and then to Malaysia and then sold it to Indian ship-breakers in the Spring of this year. The massive cruise ship contaminated with toxic waste materials is now anchored off the Alang ship-scraping beaches. The Alang yards are notorious for widespread environmental contamination and horrific labor conditions where an estimated worker perishes per day either from accidents or from cancer from toxic substances inside the structure of the ships. "It is not acceptable that the environmental liabilities of this major tourism company be simply dumped on some of the poorest and most desperate workers in India," said Ingvild Jenssen, coordinator of the NGO Platform from Brussels. "Regardless of who currently holds the purse strings for the ship, the moral responsibility remains with Norwegian Cruise Lines as beneficial owner for so many years, to take full responsibility and ensure that the toxic materials on board are safely removed and handled in optimal conditions in a developed country prior to recycling or further use." At the same time the NGO Platform has also been calling on German authorities to take actions against NCL and its mother company, Star Cruises Ltd (SCL), after the Platform uncovered a US Securities and Exchange Commission Report which appeared to indicate that NCL and SCL knew the ship was to be scrapped when it sailed from Germany on May 25, 2005 to Asia. At that time they indicated to German authorities that the ship was to be repaired and refurbished in Asia and not scrapped. Such a distinction allowed the company to circumvent the United Nations Basel Convention and German law which prohibits export of hazardous waste from developed to developing countries(ii). However, after the ship arrived in Asia no effort was made to refurbish the ship despite interest from known businessmen that wish to buy the ship and make it available for re-use as a hotel, casino or museum. Instead the ship was reportedly sold to the Haryana Group of Industries, a ship-breaker that is desperate to reinvigorate the discredited Indian shipbreaking industry following the highly publicized return of the French Aircraft carrier Clemenceau from India to France earlier this year. Like the Clemenceau, the export of the SS Norway from Germany and then from Malaysia has sparked global outrage among civil society groups, because NCL and SCL failed to decontaminate the vessel before export and instead is hoping to simply pass the toxic burden to India and some of the poorest workers on earth. The Indian shipbreaking yards do not have adequate facilities to manage asbestos in the optimal way and have no capacity at all to properly manage and destroy PCBs. The dangers of the toxic constituents in the SS Norway was once again brought to light in a July 16, 2006 letter by Mr. Briac Beilvert, CEO of the French company, Ship Decommissioning Industries SAS (SDI) to the Indian Ministry of Environment. Mr. Beilvert discloses in the letter that SDI had a technical team inspect the SS Norway while it was at the Port of Bremerhaven, Germany in 2005(iii). SDI expressed great concern that due to the explosion in the engine room asbestos fibers have been released into the atmosphere of the vessel actively polluting several decks. Mr. Beilvert further cautioned the Indian authorities that he was able to identify Cadmium, Chromium compounds, Mercury compounds, Polybrominated Diphenyl Ethers (PBDE), Polybrominated Biphenyls (PBBs), Tributyls, Heavy Metals, Hydraulic and Lubricating oils and various other hazardous substances and materials in the SS Norway. (i)Letter is available at: www.ban.org/Library/060721_demand_letter.html (ii)Report is available at:www.ban.org/Library/Star_Cruises_Deception_Report_Final.pdf (iii)Letter is available at: www.ban.org/Library/060716_letter.html