

Toxic Waste Ship Rejected: Turkey Closes Ports to “Dutch Clemenceau”

2006-08-25 18:08:19 Shipbreaking

25 August 2006 - The newly formed Turkish civil society coalition, Initiative Against Hazardous Shipbreaking in Turkey (Tehlikeli Gemi Sökümünü Önleme Girişimi) and the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking, a coalition of human rights, environmental and public health groups, are demanding that the Dutch Government takes back the toxin-laden ship, following a decision by Turkey yesterday to refuse entry of the vessel, which was exported there from Amsterdam for breaking up. The MS Otapan contains large amounts of highly toxic materials, including an estimated 60 tonnes of asbestos plus TBT, sulphur cakes, heavy metals and very likely PCBs.

The NGO Platform on Shipbreaking, has joined with Turkish NGOs to applaud the decision of the Turkish Minister of Environment, Mr. Osman Pepe, and demand that the ship - which is legally owned by the government of the Netherlands - be exported back to Amsterdam for “detoxification”, a move that would exactly mirror the case of the French aircraft carrier ‘Clemenceau’, earlier this year. The civil society groups have highlighted that the Dutch government has contravened international law banning the transboundary movements of hazardous waste, as set out in the Basel Convention and EU Waste Shipment Regulations – both of which were strongly supported by the Dutch administration when they were introduced. The Dutch Environment Minister, Mr. Pieter van Geel, has also admitted that the Dutch government negligently provided the wrong information to Turkey on the real quantity of asbestos in the ship and failed to properly quantify the other toxins on board. The NGOs had raised alarms against the export of the MS Otapan last July 28, 2006 shortly after the vessel left the Port of Amsterdam-Noord, highlighting that Turkey lacks the appropriate expertise and the right facilities for testing and managing hazardous waste, such as PCBs, in an environmentally sound manner as required under the Basel Convention and its Technical Guidelines for ship dismantling. “Turkey’s official rejection of ‘the Dutch Clemenceau’ is a vindication for the dock and ship workers, the fisher folk, and the communities in Aliaga - the group which will be harmed by the toxins born by the Otapan, had it been dismantled in Turkey,” said Arif Ali Cangi of the Turkish Initiative. “It is not acceptable for the Dutch to pass its toxic burden to the people and environment of Turkey, particularly when Turkey can not properly manage these types of wastes.” Thousands of end-of-life ships from the global fleet, military and commercial, containing thousands of tonnes of asbestos, PCBs, lead, and other hazardous substances await dismantling in the next few years. There are only a handful of nations, mostly in the developing South, such as India and Bangladesh that host major shipbreaking facilities. Recently, there has been a growing clamour from these countries against the export of toxins into their territory. Last March the government of Bangladesh rejected the import of the SS Norway, a vessel bearing as much as 1,200 tonnes of asbestos, invoking its right under the Basel Convention to protect the health of its people and environment. The Turkish rejection of the Otapan is yet another case in the growing call for an end to toxic waste export and exploitation. “The Dutch have already taken the first step in admitting its mistake. The Otapan must go home to the Netherlands and be properly cleaned. Any other proposal by the Dutch government to aid Turkey in handling the toxic waste is inappropriate and a slap in the face of Turkey,” said Richard Gutierrez of the Global Platform on Shipbreaking. Notes to editor: 1. The Dutch State Property Department exported the toxic vessel to Turkey to cut down on disposal costs after the original owner, Navimin, went bankrupt. The Dutch notification to Turkey, required under the EU Waste Shipment Regulation, only listed 1,000 kg of asbestos was on board the ship. No other toxins were mentioned in the official notice. Yesterday, the Dutch Environment Minister admitted on Dutch radio that as much as 54,000 kg of asbestos is on board the Otapan. He also admitted however that no proper inventory exists, and acknowledged the Dutch responsibility to provide such an inventory. 2. It is the duty of the ship owner and exporting state to fully inventory and characterize the quantity of hazardous wastes on board as well as to assure environmentally sound management of all wastes prior to export. Under the Basel Technical Guidelines for ship dismantling, the exporter is also obligated to pre-clean the vessel before export. Civil society groups uncovered a report revealing that an estimated 60 tonnes of brut asbestos(1) were still onboard. They also criticized the Dutch Government for not warning the Turkish authorities or any other party of the widespread, severe contamination of the ship by asbestos, creating a serious danger to anyone visiting the ship unprepared. The misrepresentation of the amount of toxic wastes, as well as the false assurances of environmentally sound management violates the Basel Convention, and constitutes a criminal offence. (1)Report of August 11, 2006 issued by F.A. van Eijk, Van Eijk Holding B.V., based on visits to the ship in May, June and July 2006 by an asbestos expert of the company, with the objective to assess the Otapan’s asbestos’ condition.