

France exports toxic waste in defiance of international law

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On January 22, after 10 days of quarantine at the gates of Port-Saïd in Egypt, the decommissioned French aircraft carrier *Clemenceau* was finally allowed to pass through the Suez Canal on its way to the breakers yard in Alang on the east coast of India. The French government's flouting of international law and its indifference to the health and safety of workers is at the centre of the 10-day long saga.

Diplomatic and legal procedures have continually dogged the *Clemenceau* since it left the port of Toulon in the south of France on December 30. In effect France is illegally exporting a gigantic health hazard that will cost the lives of impoverished Indian workers as it already has in France. Huge quantities of asbestos have been left aboard the aircraft carrier to be stripped in the Shree Ram Scrap Vessel yards in Alang.

Asbestos was finally banned in France in 1996 after decades of workers' struggle and scientific studies forced a reluctant President Chirac to recognise the toxicity of the cancer causing agent used for a hundred years as an insulation material. The Chirac/Villepin government is not only breaching its own law on the export of asbestos but refusing to respect the Basle International Convention on the export of toxic wastes.

The Indian Supreme Court banned the *Clemenceau* from entering Indian waters on January 6 while it was on route, pending further enquiries as to the ship's status. A final decision will be made on February 13. Subsequently the Egyptian authorities followed suit and refused passage through the Suez Canal. The French Ministry of Defence reassured the Egyptian government that the *Clemenceau* was still a warship—although decommissioned in 1997—and not a merchant ship. In this case, according to the French authorities, the Basle Convention of 1999 was not applicable. The Egyptian government responded by

giving the ship a green light to pass through the Suez Canal.

The ship was built at the Brest arsenal in France in 1960. Shipyard workers there fear the worst for Indian workers who will be exposed to the asbestos. Etienne le Guilcher, who is president of the Association of Asbestos Victims in Brest, was a mechanic on the *Clemenceau* between 1961 and 1963 and now suffers from asbestosis. He said that "it is inconceivable that we leave to the Indian nation the responsibility for stripping the asbestos from this ship, which contains not two hundred tons as the maritime authorities declare but at least a thousand tons of asbestos, which is not a small amount."

For months Greenpeace France, Ban Asbestos and other pressure groups have fought to prevent the departure of the *Clemenceau* knowing that the break up of the ship in India represents "a serious risk for Indian workers" due to "the absence of specific regulations in that country for shipyards of this type." The French Ministry of Defence has given contradictory accounts of the quantities of asbestos still to be removed. Greenpeace won a court judgement allowing for an independent assessment of the exact quantity of the material, but this has been ignored by the government. Such a study would have confirmed a cover up. Its latest claim of 45 tons remaining to be removed has been exposed by the French company Technopure, which carried out initial removal work on the ship. In a statement on January 6, its CEO said only 30 percent of the asbestos had been removed and that 500 to 1,000 tons remain on the ship.

In an effort to get the Indian Supreme Court's approval on February 13 to allow the ship into Alang's yards, the French government is adding insult to injury. The spokesman for the French Ministry of Defence has

now announced an offer to repatriate to France all the asbestos waste after its removal. The fate awaiting Indian workers during the stripping process is of little concern to the French state, which is already responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of workers who were victimized by the French asbestos industry.



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