

# French government forced to recall ship laden with toxic waste

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The French government has been forced to abandon its attempt to export the ex-aircraft carrier *Clemenceau* to the Alang breakers yard in India so as to take advantage of India's lax environmental and workplace health and safety regulations.

French President Jacques Chirac intervened personally on February 15 to order the ship's recall to France, just days before he was to begin an official visit to India aimed at securing a series of commercial and arms deals with New Delhi. The large amount of toxic asbestos waste still on board the *Clemenceau* has been the subject of litigation in France and India, and the controversy was threatening to overshadow and undermine Chirac's February 19-20 visit to India.

The Indian Supreme Court's decision on February 13 to forbid entry of the *Clemenceau* into India's waters pending further study was followed almost immediately by a decision of the French Council of State to stop the ship's transfer to India. In its ruling, France's highest legal body said "there is an urgency to suspend the decisions [to export the ship] which present a serious and immediate harmful risk to the protection of the environment and public health that the plaintiff associations intend to defend."

The Council ordered the French state to pay 1,500 euros to Greenpeace and the Association of Asbestos Victims, which had brought the legal action. Its decision constituted a finding that the government had indeed contravened the International Basle Convention on the export of toxic wastes. Up to this point, the Ministry of Defence had insisted that the convention did not apply in the case of the *Clemenceau* because it was not a merchant ship but a warship, albeit one that had been decommissioned in 1997.

With the court's decision, the French government's position of ignoring environmental concerns and the

health dangers posed to workers involved in the ship's dismantling became untenable. It first tried to smooth things over with the Indian government by offering to repatriate all the asbestos waste once it was removed from the ship in Alang, thus underlining that for the French government the health of the Indian workers was never a consideration.

However, this proved to be too little, too late to influence the course of events. The decision of the Indian Supreme Court on February 13 to not allow the ship into Indian waters was influenced by the leaking of an internal memo by the Navy Chief of Staff on February 12 that 30 tons of asbestos removed from the *Clemenceau* in France had disappeared. This fatally damaged the French government's credibility in denying the claims of environmental groups that up to 1,000 tons of toxic asbestos remain aboard the decommissioned aircraft carrier. The Robin Hood ecology group now claims to have information that the ship's fuel tanks are stacked with sacks of asbestos.

According to French government spokesman Jean-François Copé, "there is no shipyard that has the capacity [in France] to break up a big cruise ship or merchant vessel or warship of the *Clemenceau*'s tonnage."

Chirac has called on his European partners to help find a solution for the dismantling of such ships and to establish "rigorous world standards." Pontificating along these lines is a poor attempt to overcome the French government's humiliating fiasco in trying to off-load its toxic wastes onto poorer countries. Perhaps the government will now be tempted to emulate the US government, which sent its own ex-aircraft carrier *America* to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean last spring, describing it as a "test." Dozens more decommissioned warships are waiting in the

Philadelphia naval yards to be dismantled or otherwise disposed of. The rotting hulks of the Russian fleet in the Baltic Sea are another example of the state, military and corporate establishments' disdain for the environment.

The Clemenceau's return voyage to Brest in France, via the Cape of Good Hope, will take three months. This tortuous route has been chosen to avoid an expensive and complicated passage through the Suez Canal. The ship was detained for 10 days at the gates of Suez on its outward voyage by the Egyptian government, which was unsure of the ship's status regarding the Basle Convention on the export of toxic wastes.

Within hours of Chirac's about-face on the Clemenceau, the Bangladesh government announced that the once-prestigious cruise liner Norway will not be allowed to enter its breaking yards. Previously named France, the ship was the post-Second World War jewel of the French merchant navy before being acquired by foreign owners. She too contains more than a thousand tons of asbestos.

The cost of the Clemenceau's return voyage to France—an estimated 4 million euros—is adding to the government's embarrassment and humiliation over the Clemenceau affair. The dismantling costs, once a facility has been constructed, are estimated at 45 million euros. The recovered steel is valued at just 8 million euros. It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, the attractive savings the French state sought to make at the expense of the Indian workers.

Defence Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who has been heavily criticised over the affair, will try to save her position by giving an explanation of the government's handling of the dismantling of the Clemenceau to the National Assembly Defence Committee next week.

The Clemenceau affair has rocked a government that was already under attack from all sides for its reactionary social policies. In recent weeks, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin has lost 9 points in his popularity ratings, more than did his predecessor Jean-Pierre Raffarin before being forced out of office. Although nobody in Parliament is calling for heads to roll (including the opposition Socialist Party), Chirac is reported by the daily *Libération* to have angrily referred to the “bloody stupidity” of his defence minister. She

may become the scapegoat to cover up the government's callous attempt to export its environmental problems at the expense of India and the impoverished Alang breaking-yard workers.

Responding to Chirac's order that the Clemenceau return to France, a spokesman for Greenpeace France called it a “victory for Indian workers and workers everywhere who break up ships.” Unquestionably, the agitation around the Clemenceau affair has brought world attention to the environmental hazards involved in the dismantling of large ships, the dangers to which breaker-yard workers are exposed, and the attempts of business and governments to dump their environmental problems on poor countries. But the recall of the Clemenceau also threatens the Alang workers. The shipyard's owners have said that thousands of jobs will be eliminated due to the loss of the Clemenceau contract and that the yard may well have to be closed.



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