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Embargoed For Release:
November 14, 2001
9:00 a.m. EST (Washington)

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U.S. MUST ASSESS SECURITY THREAT BEFORE DECIDING ON SHIPMENT OF PLUTONIUM FROM JAPAN TO ENGLAND

Washington, D.C.---The Nuclear Control Institute (NCI) and Greenpeace International (GPI) today released a letter sent to Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham calling for an assessment of the international security threat posed by a pending sea shipment of nuclear fuel containing over 30 bombs worth of plutonium from Japan to Great Britain.

Given the new threat of terrorism and associated global insecurity since the attacks of September 11, the two organizations termed the shipment of 255 kilograms of U.S.-controlled plutonium in the form of fresh reactor fuel “unjustified.” They urged Abraham to require that assessments of both proliferation and terrorism risks be prepared before the proposed transport by two lightly armed freighters is considered for approval.

“The plan to ship plutonium half-way around the world is foolhardy in the face of the new threat environment,” said NCI Executive Director Tom Clements. “In response to September 11, the Department of Energy cancelled all domestic shipments of fissile materials in the United States and should not even be considering approval of a plutonium shipment of this magnitude on the high seas.”

In their letter, sent on October 25, NCI and GPI stated that the “threat of the theft or diversion of plutonium for use in nuclear devices, as well as the threat of attack for the purpose of creating a radiological event, must be thoroughly analyzed” before U.S. consent is given for transport of the plutonium. No response has yet been received from Energy Secretary Abraham.

Damon Moglen, Greenpeace International Plutonium Campaign Coordinator, called for cancellation of the shipment. “By pressing ahead with this transport, the Japanese and British government-controlled companies engaged in plutonium commerce display a reckless disregard of the risks posed by their activities,” said Moglen. “The only responsible course of action is for Japan to immediately withdraw the plutonium transport plan it has submitted with British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. (BNFL) to the U.S. Government ”

The proposed shipment of eight fuel assemblies of 3,439 kilograms of mixed uranium-plutonium oxide fuel (MOX) was originally shipped to Japan in 1999 from British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL). This was to be the first commercial-scale use of MOX fuel in a conventional Japanese nuclear power reactor, but it was rejected by the Kansai Electric Power Company

after KEPCO discovered that BNFL employees had falsified quality-control data on the fuel. KEPCO demanded return of the fuel to BNFL's Sellafield site, where the fuel had been fabricated with plutonium removed from Japanese spent fuel shipped to the THORP reprocessing factory. Initial use of MOX in Japan has since been frozen due to citizen protest spurred by the falsification scandal.

The United States maintains legal control over this plutonium and other plutonium that is extracted from U.S.-supplied nuclear fuel after use in Japanese power reactors. Thus, U.S. consent for the plutonium transfer is required, pursuant to the terms of the U.S.-Japan Nuclear Cooperation Agreement. The consent must take the form of a "subsequent arrangement," as provided for in Section 131 of the Atomic Energy Act. That subsequent arrangement must first be approved by the Executive Branch and then sent to Congress for a 15-day review period.

Prior to September 11, the Bush Administration appeared ready to approve the shipment and send the subsequent arrangement to the Senate Foreign Relations and the House International Relations Committees. In their letter to Energy Secretary Abraham, NCI and GPI noted that the Atomic Energy Act requires him to find that the Japan-UK plutonium fuel shipment will not be "inimical to the common defense and security of the United States." The Act contemplates that, in appropriate circumstances, the State Department will prepare a Nuclear Proliferation Assessment Statement. In addition, a "written assessment of the risk" will be prepared when the Secretary of Defense determines that "the export or transfer (of plutonium) might be subject to a genuine terrorist threat."

NCI and GPI sent their letter urging preparation of those documents given that it was unknown if such assessments were being undertaken in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. "Preparation of both of these documents is essential" the two organizations wrote, given that "material containing 225 kilograms of plutonium would be an attractive target for those seeking to obtain nuclear weapons materials." Weapons-usable plutonium can be removed from fresh MOX fuel in a straightforward chemical process.

Copies of the letter were sent to Secretary of State Powell, who must concur with the subsequent arrangement, and to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Chairman Meserve of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, who must be consulted before the subsequent arrangement is sent to Congress.

An affirmative vote by Congress is not required for the subsequent arrangement to take effect, but a negative vote could defeat it.

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A copy of the letter and other information on plutonium shipments and stockpiles worldwide are available on the NCI web site (www.nci.org). The news release will also be available on the Greenpeace USA web site (www.greenpeaceusa.org).