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UK court asked to halt nuclear shipment from Japan

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Greenpeace was today applying to Britain's High Court to prevent a consignment of weapons-usable plutonium being shipped from Japan to the UK.

The environmental group faces a race against time as two British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) ships were due to leave Takahama with the cargo today.

In 1999 the fuel, known as MOX, caused a diplomatic incident between Japan and Britain when it emerged that BNFL workers had falsified safety data.

The Japanese rejected the shipment and insisted it had to go back to the UK before they buy more fuel from BNFL's new £470m (€734m) Sellafield MOX plant.

Lawyers for Greenpeace were applying for an injunction to stop the shipment, which the group described as a "floating target for terrorists", leaving Japan.

They were also seeking permission to apply for a judicial review of the Environment Agency's decision not to treat the material as radioactive waste and not to follow the required procedure for nuclear waste imports.

A Greenpeace spokesman said: "We have been told the High Court hearing is at 10.30am - but as that is the evening in Japan, the ships may have left while we are all asleep over here.

"We will just have to wait and see if they have gone by then. If they have, we will go ahead with seeking leave to apply for a judicial review."

An Environment Agency spokesman said it would not be opposing the initial application for leave to bring proceedings for judicial review.

"However, we will be robustly defending our decision should a full case come to court," the spokesman added.

Greenpeace said the shipment is a mixture of plutonium and uranium oxides containing 255kg of plutonium - and claimed it would be relatively easy to separate out enough plutonium to make 50 nuclear weapons.

British Nuclear Fuels has told the Environment Agency that it intends to recover the plutonium and uranium within the MOX - short for "mixed oxides".

BNFL spokesman Paul Vallance said it would "vigorously contest" any attempt to stop the shipment.

Two BNFL ships, the Pacific Pintail and Pacific Teal, have sailed to Takahama to collect the consignment and transport it to Sellafield. The timing of the departure was being kept secret for security reasons.

But Greenpeace claims the MOX should be classed as radioactive waste, since no use for it is foreseen and Britain has huge stockpiles of uranium and plutonium.

Greenpeace nuclear campaigner Pete Roche said the ships would be a "floating target for terrorists".

He added: "To send highly radioactive materials on a six week trip on the high seas was a stupid idea before September 11. In today's context it can only be described as insane."

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