

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Fijian leader says nuclear waste transports through Pacific must be opposed

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Fiji called on a group including most of the world's poorest and smallest states to join it in opposing shipments of radioactive nuclear fuel traveling through the Pacific Ocean between Japan and Britain.

"We will be asking you to join with us in expressing our outrage and opposition to those who are so willing to put the Pacific and our peoples at risk," Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase said Thursday in a speech to a summit of the 78-nation African, Caribbean and Pacific group meeting in this Fijian resort town.

His call came as the environmental group Greenpeace accused two ships carrying the fuel from Japan to Britain of breaching the 320 kilometer (200 mile) sea zones of four small Pacific states.

The British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. ships, carrying 255 kilograms (560 pounds) of a rejected mixture of plutonium and uranium known as MOX, had disregarded the wishes of Pacific states to avoid their exclusive sea zones, said Greenpeace Pacific nuclear campaigner Ange Heffernan.

The shipment has been heavily opposed by environmentalists who fear a leak of radioactive material, accident or terrorist attack.

Qarase said the Pacific Ocean had defined the region's peoples, shaped their cultures, created their myths and traditions and fed them.

"This relationship with the ocean will make it easy for you to understand why we are so adamantly opposed to any actions which expose it to threats of pollution, hazardous waste and the destructive effects of nuclear and missile tests," he said.

The two ships are expected to pass through the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand this weekend, where an anti-nuclear flotilla of a dozen yachts is waiting for them.

The armed cargo vessels set off from Japan on July 4 for the two-month journey to take the rejected radioactive material back to its maker in Britain.

Japan's Kansai Electric Power Co. imported the fuel in 1999 for an experimental nuclear power program. But British Nuclear Fuels, the fuel's maker, later admitted it had falsified quality records and agreed to ship the fuel back to Britain.

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