



Who should dispose of hazardous waste?

From Ted Higson

Monday January 16 2006

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Letters To The Editor

SIR, I write this letter in response to the events and commentary surrounding the French warship Clemenceau and the highly publicised battles that are being waged regarding the eventual disposal of hazardous materials on board this vessel.

This discussion will focus, not on the Clemenceau itself, but upon the designation of this and other end-of-life ships as "hazardous waste" and the location for disposal of such waste.

The ship recycling industry has been highly criticised in recent years for the environmental and occupational records that accompany practices in the Indian subcontinent and in other countries not meeting Western standards.

As a weapon against continued practices in these areas, opponents have sought to designate all end-of-life ships as hazardous waste, thereby making their transport illegal under trans-boundary movement of hazardous waste regulations.

The goal is to make the host nations of shipowners the practical owner of the hazardous materials contained in these vessels. This argument would imply that a country which is home to a specific shipowner should dispose of these materials on its own soil.

However, a continuation of this argument should progress to include the notion that shipowners purchased these vessels from another company, often from another country in which the vessel was constructed.

In this case, should the host nation of the shipyard that built the ship be responsible for eventual disposal of the hazardous materials used to build the vessel?

Certainly, the host nation collected taxes on the income that the shipyard earned when selling the ship.

Why, in this case, is the burden placed on the host nation of the shipowner? A further progression of the argument begs the question: in which country did a company produce the asbestos, PCBs and other materials that were used by a shipyard to construct a vessel?

Globalisation would suggest that the materials were produced in countries other than that of the owner and the shipyard that built the vessel. Why not, then, track the origins of the materials and mandate that they be disposed of in the country that collected taxes on the manufacture of the hazardous materials originally?

Unless the industry is prepared to look clearly at where hazardous wastes are generated and demand disposal in that country, designation for the sake of convenience appears to be a random and unsatisfying conclusion.

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