

Two British ships arrive in Japan to carry plutonium to US

March 21 2016, by Mari Yamaguchi



The Pacific Egret, one of the two British-flagged ships arrived in Japan, is anchored at a port in the village of Tokai, northeast of Tokyo, Monday morning, March 21, 2016, to transport a cache of plutonium worth dozens of atomic bombs to the U.S. for storage under a bilateral agreement. Japan's Kyodo News agency said the two armed ships, operated by Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd., showed up early Monday on the coast of Tokai, home to the country's main nuclear research facility, Japan Atomic and Energy Agency. (Shigeyuki Inakuma/Kyodo News via AP)

Two British ships arrived in eastern Japan on Monday to transport a shipment of plutonium—enough to make dozens of atomic bombs—to the U.S. for storage under a bilateral agreement.

The ships arrived at the coastal village of Tokai, northeast of Tokyo, home to the country's main nuclear research facility, the Japan Atomic and Energy Agency, according to Kyodo News and citizens' groups. It will take several hours to load the [plutonium](#)-filled casks onto the ships, both fitted with naval guns and other protection.

The Pacific Egret and Pacific Heron, both operated by Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd., will take the 331 kilograms (730 pounds) of plutonium to the Savannah River Site, a U.S. government facility in South Carolina under a pledge made by Japan in 2014. The plutonium, mostly from the U.S. and some from France originally, had been used for research purposes.

Japanese officials refused to confirm details, citing security reasons.

Japan's stockpile and its fuel-reprocessing ambitions to use plutonium as fuel for power generation have been a source of international security concerns.

Japan has accumulated a massive stockpile of plutonium—11 metric tons in Japan and another 36 tons that have been reprocessed in Britain and France and are waiting to be returned to Japan—enough to make nearly 6,000 atomic bombs.



The Pacific Egret, one of the two British-flagged ships arrived in Japan, is anchored at a port in the village of Tokai, northeast of Tokyo, Monday morning, March 21, 2016, to transport a cache of plutonium worth dozens of atomic bombs to the U.S. for storage under a bilateral agreement. Japan's Kyodo News agency said the two armed ships, operated by Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd., showed up early Monday on the coast of Tokai, home to the country's main nuclear research facility, Japan Atomic and Energy Agency. (Iori Sagisawa/Kyodo News via AP)

The latest shipment comes just ahead of a nuclear security summit in Washington later this month, and is seen as a step to showcase both countries' nuclear non-proliferation efforts.

Washington has increasingly voiced concerns about the nuclear spent-fuel-reprocessing plans by Japan and China to produce plutonium for energy generation, a technology South Korea also wants to acquire, saying they pose security and proliferation risks.

Japan began building a major reprocessing plant with French state-owned company Areva in the early 1990s. The trouble-plagued project has been delayed ever since, and in November its opening was postponed until 2018 to allow for more safety upgrades and inspections.



The Pacific Egret, one of the two British-flagged ships arrived in Japan, is anchored at a port in front of Tokai No. 2 Power Station in the village of Tokai, northeast of Tokyo, Monday morning, March 21, 2016, to transport a cache of plutonium worth dozens of atomic bombs to the U.S. for storage under a bilateral agreement. Japan's Kyodo News agency said the two armed ships, operated by Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd., showed up early Monday on the coast of Tokai,

home to the country's main nuclear research facility, Japan Atomic and Energy Agency. (Iori Sagisawa/Kyodo News via AP)

Experts say launching the Rokkasho reprocessing plant would not ease the situation, because Japan has little hope of achieving a spent fuel recycling program.

Japan's plutonium-burning fast breeder reactor Monju, suspended for more than 20 years, is now on the verge of being closed due to poor safety records and technical problems, while optional plans to burn uranium-plutonium mixtures of MOX fuel in conventional reactors have been delayed since the Fukushima crisis. Only two of Japan's 43 workable reactors are currently online.

© 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Two British ships arrive in Japan to carry plutonium to US (2016, March 21) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-british-ships-japan-plutonium.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.