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Greenpeace Ship Tours Central America

by Deborah Tyroler

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On July 30, the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior arrived in Panama, first leg of a Central American tour to promote public awareness regarding imports of toxic waste and transporting of nuclear waste through the region's waterways. After crossing the Panama canal and docking briefly in the port of Balboa, the Rainbow Warrior made stops in El Salvador and Guatemala. During a preliminary meeting held in Managua prior to the UN Conference on Environment and Development in June, six Central American leaders signed an agreement rejecting the importation of toxic waste in their countries. The agreement must now be ratified by the countries' legislatures, although Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama already have legislation in place which prohibits toxic waste imports. According to Greenpeace environmental activist Erwin Garzona, companies based in industrialized nations have made at least 49 separate proposals to Central American countries over the past five years requesting authorization for toxic waste imports. Although the majority of the petitions were rejected, some were not. In 1989 El Salvador accepted a load of toxic ash; in 1990 Honduras received and burned a load of boxes that had been exposed to radiation; construction materials contaminated with cadmium, arsenic and zinc were imported into El Salvador in 1989; and in 1989 toxic waste was dumped in the Gulf of Fonseca, which borders El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Greenpeace activists, as well as environmentalists from Central America, are particularly concerned about the passage of boats containing nuclear materials through the Panama canal. According to Itzel Damaris Rojas, director of the Panamanian Environment and National Parks Foundation (Fundacion de Parques Nacionales y Medio Ambiente), 26 vessels containing at least 156 tons of nuclear materials passed through the canal between January 1989 and November 1991. According to Rojas, one of every 271 boats that pass through the canal is involved in some type of accident, representing an average of between 45 and 50 accidents each year. She said an accident involving a boat carrying nuclear material through the canal would have devastating consequences for Panama. Greenpeace has indicated that a single ship transporting approximately one ton of reprocessed plutonium is scheduled to travel from France to Japan in October or November and is likely to pass through the canal. Panama Canal Commission security specialist Freddie Chen said that "boats with all kinds of radioactive cargo have been passing through the canal for the last 45 years without problem" due to the existence of "extreme security measures and rigorous safety standards." On Aug. 7, the Panamanian Foreign Ministry issued a communique stating that the government cannot deny access to the canal for ships carrying nuclear material as long as they comply with international and local safety standards. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 07/27/92, 07/30/92; Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias-Spanish news service EFE, 07/29- 31/92, 08/04/92, 08/06-08/92; Agence France-Presse, 07/31/92)

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