'Waste' ship probe

A cruiseship at the centre of a hazardous waste row with US environmental authorities has stirred up more controversy after being towed into Alang for scrapping.

The 1950-built Oceanic (ex- Independence ) has turned up in India 18 months after being taken from US waters amid claims it was not heading for recycling in the subcontinent.

Sources say it arrived around midnight several days ago under the name Platinum 11 and its earlier identity concealed.

India’s environment ministry has launched an investigation into legal ownership of the vessel and at TradeWinds’s press time information from a government source indicated that the authorities may order Platinum 11 out of Indian waters and back to the US.

Local breakers say its true history was only revealed after a collision with another vessel. Questions have been raised over alleged attempts to fast-track the beaching process.

Sources also claim that Hariyana Shipbreakers in Alang, which was to have recycled the Platinum 11, has pulled out of the deal and arrangements were being made to switch the cruiseship to another plot.

The Indian Platform on Ship-Breaking (IPOS), a coalition of environmental and other pressure groups, has led calls for the 20,000-gt cruiseship to be taken back to the US.

Last year, demolition cash buyer Global Marketing Systems (GMS), which originally bought the ship, had to pay $518,000 to settle an administrative complaint involving the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

GMS and its shipowning arm Global Shipping LLC had been accused of illegally distributing and exporting a ship containing polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), although it insisted that all statutory permissions were secured before departing San Francisco Bay.

The company denies that it has now disposed of the former Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) vessel for scrap. Its lawyer Shashank Agrawal insists that GMS sold it over a year ago and it no longer has any links. He could not say, however, who it was sold to.

It has been claimed that the Platinum 11 could be taken to a recycler linked to GMS, which promotes the green recycling of ships in Alang, but there is no evidence to support this.

Gujarat Maritime Board (GMB), Gujarat Pollution Control Board (GPCB) and customs allowed the Platinum 11 to anchor but there was subsequent talk that the owners were seeking clearance to beach it as an “emergency” measure.

Apart from having reportedly collided with a ship named as the Amira-S, the Platinum 11’s tug, the Barracuda-1, was claimed to have broken down and both vessels at one point were reported to be drifting.

The GMB despatched a tug to give assistance and safeguard the eight-strong crew of the Barracuda-1. If the vessel had ended up on the beach, it would have settled the matter but some have suggested the Platinum 11 was never really in any danger.

Gopal Krishna of the IPOS claims the 682-ft cruiseship contains an estimated 210 tons of PCB-contaminated material and around 250 tons of asbestos in its structure.

He demanded in a letter to the Ministry of Environment and Forests that the Platinum 11 be recalled by the US in the same way that the aircraft carrier Le Clemenceau was returned to France amid claims of toxic dumping.

A GMB spokesman has said that inspecting the Platinum 11 for hazardous materials could take up to two weeks. Sources in Alang previously told TradeWinds that the pollution-control board had estimated only between 62 and 100 tons of asbestos on board and if correct, the Platinum 11 could be beached within days.
GP Patel of the GPCB says two inspections had been carried out and there was no "loose" hazardous material.

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