Wallstrom, Commission: Mr President, the Commission has received a formal complaint from a Member of this Parliament against the UK, regarding the import of old warships into the United Kingdom.

The Commission will, of course, write to the United Kingdom authorities as a matter of urgency to check whether there are any problems of compatibility with Community law. Let me assure Parliament at the outset that, as European Commissioner for the Environment, I simply do not believe that it makes sense to tow these contaminated ships across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. Facilities for recycling them already exist in the United States of America.

We are concerned by information from third parties that suggest that the ships may leak oil, PCBs and asbestos. Four ships have already left the United States and nine more are to follow. Two ships left two weeks ago and two ships left last week. An American court has issued a temporary restraining order regarding the nine remaining ships, and a final decision is awaited.

I understand that the US authorities have voluntarily agreed not to send these remaining nine ships until March next year. If this is confirmed, I welcome the postponement, but I believe it should be more than just a postponement. All of the ships should remain in the US for environmentally sound dismantling, according to the proximity principle.

More generally, and quite apart from this specific case, I am also concerned about the environmental and human health problems related to ship breaking, in particular the implications for non-OECD countries. Our estimate suggests that around 2 200 ships will be phased out altogether and scrapped as a result of the follow-up to the Prestige disaster and the phasing-out of single-hulled ships. We cannot dump this environmental problem on developing countries.

Dismantling of ships is often undertaken under operating conditions that, from an environmental, health and safety perspective, cannot be considered sound. Unfortunately, it is the case that EU-owned and/or -flagged ships are also dismantled under such conditions. The parties to the Basel Convention, which deals with the control and management of hazardous waste including old ships, are meeting this week in Geneva to discuss this issue among others. I met with the secretariat of the Basel Convention this week to discuss the issue, and I am reassured that we will make progress there in addressing the issues before us.

At a time when we are committed to developing an ambitious new European strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment, I do not believe that we should run the
risks associated with transporting these ships across the Atlantic. In the light of the Erika and Prestige disasters, we need a precautionary approach to protecting this most fragile resource.

In conclusion, I put to Parliament the question I put to the UK authorities last week. Would it not make more sense to send British expertise in the other direction, across the Atlantic?

END OPENING DECLARATION

Full transcript of all remarks to be available at: