

ARGENTUM VIVUM SOLUTIONS

Lecture at the conference on "Hazardous Wastes" in Stavanger on 13th/14th September 2017:

U 864 - Is an environmental catastrophe on the Norwegian coast impending?

Off the Norwegian shore the German submarine "Caesar" rests on the sea floor – with 61 tons of mercury and 7000 kg explosives aboard. The nightmare scenario is the catastrophe of Minamata: Since the mid-fifties almost 2000 people in this Japanese city have died agonizing deaths from mercury poisoning. Every tenth child has been born crippled. People had eaten contaminated fish - a factory had discharged 27 tons of mercury to the sea off the coast of Minamata.

Once in the sea, mercury is an even more hazardous poison than ashore. When the liquid heavy metal gets into sea water, microorganisms can convert it into methylated mercury. This chemical compound is many times more hazardous than pure mercury.



Chernobyl as a role model - but under water?

Many do not believe that covering and encapsulating U-864 is safe in the long run. A concrete sarcophagus is a constant risk, especially if the 7000 kg TNT should detonate spontaneously. A statement concerning the equipment on board U-864 issued by the German authorities in June 2010 said this:

"..the submarine (U-864) is fully equipped for combat, on board are all of the required ammunitions, from torpedoes and grenades to handguns."

In August 2010 a German authority for explosive ordnance dealt with the question which hazards are posed by the TNT on board. The answer in part says:

"(that)...a detonation of several torpedoes in sequence in this case ... cannot be excluded"

During the ensuing discussion at the conference the question came up, why only the presence of mercury was known up until now, but the issue of the explosives had not been considered. The scenario presented was completely new to the participants. They agreed that the public needs to be informed concerning this hazard to ensure politicians would act promptly.

Consequences of a spontaneous detonation for the environment and the fishing industry

"The wreck is positioned in an area with extremely strong ocean currents", says Nils Tore Skogland, manager of the environmental protection organisation Friends of the Earth in the province Hordaland concerned.

If the spontaneous detonation of several torpedoes should meet with a chain of other unfortunate events, a stretch of 2650 kilometres just off the Norwegian coastline could be contaminated with mercury in just two months. The possible consequences are well illustrated by the tragedy of Minamata.

