

OUTRAGE

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Japan courts trouble for resuming commercial whaling

TOKYO: Japanese fishermen set sail today to hunt whales commercially for the first time in more than three decades after Tokyo's controversial withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) triggered outrage from environmental groups.

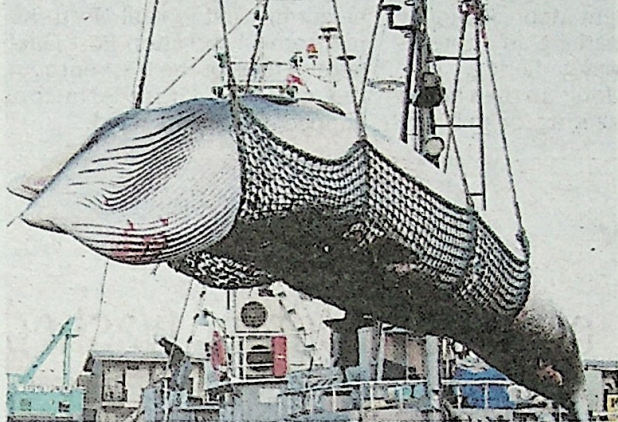
The planned hunts, while small and far from internationally protected waters, have also sparked anger in countries where whaling is considered outdated and harmful.

But in Japan, whaling communities hailed the return of the practice, with Tokyo defending it

as a tradition that should not be subject to outside interference.

For years, the issue of whaling was a diplomatic headache for Japan, which came under attack for exploiting an IWC loophole to hunt whales for "scientific" purposes.

Critics accused Japan of effectively carrying out stealth whaling, saying the hunts had no scientific value, while Tokyo continued to push for permission to resume commercial whaling outright. But last year it announced it would withdraw from the IWC and no longer complied with its



A hunted Minke whale being lifted by a crane at Kushiro port in Hokkaido prefecture last year.

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decades-old ban on commercial killing of the ocean giants.

The decision comes into effect from today, when a flotilla of ships that once carried out whaling for "scientific research" will set sail from the Shimonoseki port in western Japan.

Masayuki Komatsu, a former top Japanese negotiator at the IWC between 1991 and 2004, said

Tokyo should return to the organisation or risk seeing whaling die out altogether. Compared with research whaling programmes in the Antarctic and the Northern Pacific, "the size of coastal whaling is tiny", he said.

"The withdrawal from the IWC means the Japanese whaling industry is on the path towards extinction." **AFP**