

# 'Soft stance' on whale slaughter

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**THE Federal Government has come under fire over its response to Japanese plans to kill humpback whales in Antarctic waters.**

Japan will go to a meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in June asking to extend its quota of about 440 minke whales a year to humpback whales - an endangered species.

Although Australia opposes the plan, it stopped short of supporting moves by environment groups to try to prevent Japanese whaling ships from entering the Australian whale sanctuary in Antarctic waters.

The Humane Society International (HSI) launched legal action against a Japanese whaling company in the Federal Court last year in an attempt to stop its ships hunting minke whales in the area, but the federal government has opposed the application.

Attorney-General Philp Ruddock today said Australia would instead pursue the matter through diplomacy in the IWC.

HSI spokeswoman Nicola Beynon said Prime Minister John Howard should have raised the matter with his Japanese counterpart Junichiro Koizumi when he visited Tokyo last month.

"(The Government's) diplomatic efforts aren't working, so we really need to ramp it up a notch," Ms Beynon said.

Labor has called for the same kind of action, arguing that the matter should be dealt with at the highest diplomatic levels using Australia's close relationship with Japan to apply pressure.

"(Foreign Minister Alexander) Downer appears to have been virtually silent on the matter in terms of his public statements towards the Japanese," opposition foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd said.

"Mr Downer has the responsibility to raise this immediately at the highest levels in Tokyo and with the Japanese Embassy in Canberra."

Labor's environment spokesman Anthony Albanese said Japan had killed about 8000 whales in the name of science since 1985, but would not comment on whether Australia should use its patrol forces to prevent Japanese ships killing whales in the sanctuary.

Mr Ruddock said Australia could be accused of piracy if this happened.

The IWC declared a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986, but whaling for scientific purposes is still allowed and it is this exemption that Japan hopes to use to start killing humpback whales.

The IWC will meet in South Korea from the end of May.

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