

Dumping of Toxic Waste in Asia

Ship-breaking in India

If done correctly, the decommissioning of end-of-life vessels contaminated with asbestos, lead, mercury and PCBs is an expensive process. Seeking to minimize costs, governments have taken advantage of the world's dirtiest industry: the scrapping of toxic ships by workers in Asian countries.⁶¹ The *Clemenceau*, a 27,000 tonne flagship French warship, set sail for the Alang shipyard (India) on December 31, 2005 after a ruling by a French administrative court which confirmed the ship's status as "material of war." The ship was "pure poison," containing a cocktail of lethal substances including up to 1,000 tonnes of asbestos. Inconveniently for French decision makers, the international dumping of such contaminated waste infringed the Basel Convention, and the European Waste Shipment Regulation as well as national law.

The French Government's actions were based on double standards: at home, the import and use of asbestos was banned yet abroad the Government was prepared for scrapyards workers to receive hazardous exposures in the most primitive of conditions. Ship-breaking is big business in Alang Bay; in 2001-2002, 264 ships were broken up by 25,000-40,000 workers, some as young as 17. Women carry away the lighter items from the ships including many which contain or are covered with asbestos. Asbestos is torn off steelwork with bare hands; people dry out crocidolite so it can be resold. The workers are mostly barefoot and protection from the many occupational hazards they are exposed to consists, in general, of a scarf over their mouths. No protective equipment or respiratory protection is provided to protect workers from hazardous asbestos exposures. Working conditions which are typical in Alang include the following:

- exploited and illiterate unskilled workers paid US\$2/day;
- deaths, fatal accidents, minor and major injuries are common and no medical assistance is available;
- little or no provision of even the bare minimum of protective gear;
- no job security or redress of grievances exist;
- the presence of asbestos and the dumping of asbestos and other toxic substances put workers' health at risk both at work and at home as many live on or near the worksite.⁶²

P. K. Ganguly, from the Center of Indian Trade Unions,

(CITU) sums up the situation faced by those in the ship-breaking yards as follows:

"These workers are the most vulnerable workers in our sector, constantly migrating in search of seasonal jobs in the shipyards, subject to ruthless employers who are callous about their occupational health and safety and totally ignored by the political authorities... workers in Alang face daily exploitation and exposure to life-threatening hazards due to the inability of the government to establish and enforce standards."⁶³

A global campaign to send the *Clemenceau* back to France was mounted by international NGOs led by the Corporate Accountability Desk (India), Ban Asbestos France and the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking.⁶⁴ Legal proceedings were initiated in France and India by the NGOs to force the recall of the ship. After demonstrations by Greenpeace and environmentalists 50 nautical miles off the coast of Egypt on January 12, 2006,⁶⁵ authorities in Egypt delayed the ship's passage through the Suez Canal claiming they had been misinformed as to the nature of the on-board contamination. Synchronized demonstrations in France, India, Egypt and Bangladesh were covered in media reports that were widely circulated. On February 15, 2006, a French Court suspended the authorization of the Clem-

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enceau's passage; shortly thereafter the French President recalled the ship. On May 17, 2006, the ship returned to its home port after its fruitless US\$38 million 12,000 mile quest to find an Asian scrapyards willing to decommission it. The inability of international treaties and national laws to prevent the global trade in toxic waste, which was exposed by the Clemenceau debacle, has led to renewed efforts to engage with regional authorities such as the European Union to ensure that there is a clampdown on such illegal practices.

Despite the success achieved with the Clemenceau, business in Alang's scrapyards is booming. From November 2006-January 2007 a total of 47 ships arrived for scrapping; January's figure of 24 marked a two year high and signifies an increase in Alang's workload from the measly 32 ships which arrived in the five months between June to October 2006.⁶⁶ Ship-breaking commentators say that the strength of the steel market in Alang and political turmoil in Bangladesh are responsible; Alang is receiving small (5,000 tonne) and mid-sized (12-15,000 tonne) tankers from the Gulf countries.

Ship-breaking in Bangladesh

For more than 20 years, commercial ship-breaking operations have been carried out in Bangladesh; an average 180-250 ships a year are scrapped at 35 yards directly employing 50,000 individuals and indirectly employing 80,000. The work in these yards is labor intensive and carries no job security or social security protection; non-unionized, illiterate local migrants who make up 98% of the workforce have no knowledge of the asbestos hazard. Occupational accidents, injuries and deaths as well as hazardous exposures to a myriad of toxins occur on a daily basis.

There are many natural and political reasons for the growth of ship-breaking in Bangladesh. The coastline is suitable for the beaching of large vessels and the geographical isolation of the shipyards prevents social monitoring of working conditions. The availability of cheap labor, the low cost of machinery and the lack of health and safety legislation keep operating costs low. The resale value of material reclaimed from the ships is high:

- re-rolling mills process reclaimed scrap iron;
- shops sell old ships' furniture;
- reclaimed asbestos sheet materials are reused;
- second-hand electric equipment and materials are sold as are redundant sanitary equipment, kitchen machinery and cooking appliances.

The removal of and disposal of asbestos waste is unregulated in Bangladesh and the manual crushing and reuse of asbestos from ships is common.

National mobilization on the asbestos threat has been spurred by the actions of the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE)⁶⁷ which is campaigning for a global and national ban on the import of asbestos and asbestos-contaminated ships, a ban on the reuse of redundant asbestos-containing products, government regulation, periodic workplace inspections, compensation and support for asbestos victims. As part of this remit, the OSHE and the Asian Monitor Resources Center organized a conference in Agrabad, Chittagang: *Banning Asbestos in South Asia* on December 15-16, 2006. This small informal gathering drew together occupational health experts, community activists, trade unionists and scientists from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Japan who, amongst other issues, considered: asbestos exposures in power plants in India, the asbestos hazards in the ship-breaking industry, asbestos politics in Asia and the development of asbestos victims groups and NGOs in South Asia. Indian delegate Gopal Krishna reported that the sessions in Bangladesh were both informative and productive and included a visit to shipyards where people were observed working in an asbestos-laden atmosphere with no health and safety precautions.

In collaboration with the Netherlands Confederation of Trade Unions the OSHE has embarked on a project to: raise asbestos awareness amongst ship-breaking workers, empower local trade unions to be actively engaged in the social debate on asbestos with government and company officials and develop procedures and regulations to safeguard occupational health and safety. To heighten public awareness, in April 2007 the OSHE commemorated International Workers' Memorial Day at events held in the capital city including:



- April 27: a workshop: *Making Decent Work a Reality in Bangladesh* followed by a press conference which launched a national appeal to ban asbestos;
- April 28: a public discussion on "ban asbestos" at the OSHE Center in Shitakunda, Chittagang.⁶⁸