

Terrible conditions facing workers in Asian ship-breaking yards

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The recent controversy over the demolition of the decommissioned French aircraft carrier *Clemenceau* has highlighted the terrible conditions facing workers at the giant Alang-Sosiya Ship-Breaking Yard (ASSBY) located in the Indian state of Gujarat and elsewhere in Asia.

French President Jacques Chirac was compelled to recall the warship after a French court ruling banned the *Clemenceau* in February from entering Indian waters. The court decision followed a protracted legal and protest campaign by environmental groups, including Greenpeace, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the Basel Action Network, over the presence of large amounts of asbestos in the ship and the inadequacy of health and safety measures.

Ship-breaking yards in Europe and elsewhere in the West have largely closed due to the high cost of health and safety measures and insurance for workers. By dismantling the *Clemenceau* in India, the French government was hoping to avoid domestic and European Union regulations governing the disposal of toxic wastes and to save 5 to 8 million Euros.

Most ship-breaking—nearly 90 percent—is now done in Asian yards, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, to take advantage of very low pay, poor conditions and the lack of safety regulations. India's ship-breaking industry has had an annual turnover of 25 billion rupees (\$US521 million), but competition is fierce.

Last year only 73 ships were dismantled in Indian yards compared to an average of more than 300 ships in previous years. Nitin Kanakiya, joint secretary of the Ship Recycling Industries Association, told the *Frontline* magazine in January: "[I]t is the policies of the State and Central governments that have been largely responsible for the sharp drop in India's share in ship-recycling activities, mainly, unfavourable duty structures, additional tax burdens and tax concessions given to the steel industry in Kutch."

According to a FIDH report in December 2002, Alang is the world's largest ship-breaking yard and employed up to 160,000 workers directly or indirectly in 183 different units. Besides the ship demolition there were many related businesses, including oil re-processing units, steel re-rolling mills, oxygen plants, transportation companies and a local scrap goods store. Most of the units have been closed leaving about 20 or 26 functional employing about 4,000 to 10,000 workers.

Safety and working conditions are appalling. Nine people were critically injured and five workers killed when a major fire broke out February 17, 2006 on the ship *China Sea Explorer* as it was being broken up at the Alang yards.

The FIDH reported that accidents are frequent at Alang. Between 1997 and 2002, the death toll was 132 and the number of accidents reached 173. In 2003 alone, 12 workers died in explosions. These are often caused by workers without any safety guidance using cutters and blowtorches to sever steel and pipes that contained gas or oil. No official accident statistics are compiled by the Gujarat Maritime Board or the state and national governments.

Some workers have filed legal cases in the Gujarat labour courts but most have been lost. The FIDH report commented that the legal system was "heavily biased against the workers". According to a 1997 report in the *Baltimore Sun*, the Bhavnagar labour court, which has just one judge, had a backlog of 10,000 cases.

The ships being broken up contain various toxic substances including asbestos, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), lead, chromates and mercury, despite international treaties banning the export and transport of some of these substances. Alang's workers are not equipped or trained to deal with toxic chemicals. They are not informed of the dangers and possible long-term side effects and work without basic safety equipment, such as

helmets, gloves, masks and boots. Most of them work with their bare hands and wear old slippers.

Greenpeace campaigner Ramapati Kumar said: “It is understandable for the average worker at Alang to be anxious about his immediate future—these are daily wage workers and they are impacted immediately. They are neither told about the hazardous consequences of the toxics they deal with, nor are they aware of their rights before it is too late.”

The FIDH report stated that physicians in Alang say that a major cause of deaths are accidents and occupational diseases resulting from poor working and social conditions. These include skin diseases, malaria, malnutrition, diarrhoea, tuberculosis, and respiratory problems.

Most ship-breaking workers are immigrants from other Indian states including Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and are on daily or monthly contracts. They are driven by poverty to leave home to seek work and send money back to their families who are dependent on this income. About 70 percent are agricultural workers between 20- to 40-years old, lower-caste and uneducated.

The Alang workers are mostly employed by sub-contractors known as “muqadam”. The workers have no right to see the ship owner or government officials. Any infraction—including attempting to speak to a journalist or to form a trade union—can result in dismissal. Anyone seeking to enter the yard has to seek permission from the Gujarat Maritime Board—a protracted and difficult process.

Working hours are not fixed and regulated. Nominally the working day starts at 8 a.m. and finishes 7 p.m. but overtime is often required. There is no extra pay for overtime or weekend work. No canteen is provided.

The subcontractors fix wages and hire and fire workers according to their needs. There is no paid leave and no guaranteed compensation in the event of an accident. According to the FIDH, most muqadams operate in violation of the minimal conditions set out in section 12 of the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.

Unskilled workers start on less than \$US1 a day and skilled workers are paid a maximum of \$US1.85 a day. Those who risk their lives undertaking the most dangerous work can get higher wages. Most employees live in rented shanties or small shacks built of scrap near the yard so they breathe in fumes day and night. There are no toilets or showers and no clean drinking water.

The FIDH report noted that most Alang workers do not

have any sort of Provident Fund scheme and cites the example of a 55-year-old worker who retired with no pension after working at the yard for 15 years.

Governments at the state and national level have done little or nothing to improve conditions. Their overriding concern is to maintain the industry, which is also a source of cheap steel for other businesses.

The Gujarat Maritime Board (GMB) is a semi-government institution and is responsible as the leasing and managing authority for the whole port and individual units. The board mediates between private operators and ship owners and also between the state authorities and the workers.

Due to pressure from ship-breaking businesses to keep costs low, the GMB does not enforce labour laws or safety standards and has not provided basic facilities for workers. The Labour Department in Gujarat, which is responsible for implementing labour laws and ensuring proper working and safety conditions, has not intervened either.

The highly competitive nature of the industry means that the wages, conditions and health of the ship-breaking workers are sacrificed to maintain profits and a constant flow of work.

The protests over the Clemenceau may have pointed to the lack of safety in India but have done nothing to improve the appalling conditions in the ship-breaking yards. If the Alang yard is shut, those who will bear the brunt will be the unemployed workers who have no alternative job to go to. At the same time, ships will simply be sent to other yards in Pakistan or Bangladesh where conditions are just as bad if not worse.



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