

Ship recycling

The controversy surrounding the recycling of redundant ships gained international press attention in February 2006 by the decision of President Chirac to recall the French warship 'Clemenceau' en route for demolition in India. This was despite the Indian courts ordering those environmental groups in dispute with the French Navy to stop the spread of false publicity about the safety of the operation. The decision, of course, involved a naval vessel and was clearly guided by the needs of international politics as much as the facts of the case. Nonetheless, it is an unwelcome distraction from the current practical discussions amongst governments at IMO and ILO on seeking to ensure that merchant ships that have reached the end of their working lives are recycled in yards that are safe for their workers.

ICS continues to lead the broadly based inter-industry working group on ship recycling, which has prepared the industry's position for the debate at IMO about adopting a mandatory Convention on the issue. Industry fully agrees that some areas of the existing IMO Code on ship recycling, which was largely based on guidelines developed by the shipping industry, should be made mandatory - for example, gas freeing of compartments prior to delivery at recycling yards and the maintenance of inventories of materials that need treating with care. However, not every part of the IMO Code lends itself to mandatory application. Moreover, what will be most important is the establishment of a system of approved recycling yards, demonstrating which facilities meet acceptable safety standards, to which reference can be made when negotiating the disposal of ships.

In December 2005, ICS represented the industry at the second meeting of the IMO/ILO Joint Working Group on ship recycling, which was helpful in that it recognised IMO as being the lead organisation to progress work on this issue and thus reconfirmed the direction it was taking. However, although this position is shared by most EU member states, some European environmental interests continue to promote the concept that ship recycling is subject to the Basel Convention governing the export of hazardous wastes.

Industry is steadfast in maintaining that the Basel Convention was never drafted with ships in mind. Moreover, other considerations aside, there is no indication that Europe in particular would be either willing or able to develop the recycling capacity needed if the export of old ships was restricted, especially given the accelerated phase-out of single hull tankers now in progress, and which ironically involves the early dismantling of hundreds of ships containing millions of tons of redundant steel.

The undisputed pressure point remains, of course, the working and environmental conditions in the recycling yards in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, and efforts must continue to ensure that the necessary steps are taken – and perhaps funding provided – to address this problem in a constructive and timely manner.