

## Is there a decent way to break ships?

GENEVA (ILO Online) - The dispatch of the aircraft carrier 'Clemenceau' from France to the world's largest ship graveyard on India's west coast for scrapping has focused new attention on the human and environmental dangers inherent in ship breaking. While breaking ships and selling of the scrap and hardware from retired vessels provides work and income for tens of thousands of persons in Bangladesh, China, India and Pakistan, the work is dangerous and can cause deaths due to work accidents as well as serious acute and chronic health problems, especially due to exposure to hazardous substances such as asbestos. ILO Online spoke with ILO shipbreaking expert Paul Bailey.

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### **ILO Online: The dispatch of the French aircraft carrier 'Clemenceau' to India for scrapping has attracted attention to the working conditions in shipbreaking yards. What is the situation there?**

**Paul Bailey:** Worker safety has clearly not been a top priority at shipbreaking facilities in the region, and labourers seldom have access to basic personal protective equipment such as hard hats, gloves and goggles for steel cutting activities. Many are killed and thousands injured working in often tortuous conditions. Titanic-sized vessels are floated ashore and cut up by workers who are often exposed to deadly toxins, exploding gases, falling steel plates and other dangers.

### **ILO Online: Asbestos is among these deadly toxins...**

**Paul Bailey:** That's correct. On average, a ship that is being dismantled contains about five to six tons of asbestos. Almost everything on such a ship will get recycled, including the asbestos. There is no harm in recycling safe products, but scrapping and repackaging asbestos from the ships without any protection devices is unacceptable. In the case of the Clemenceau, the matter has caused quite some controversy. While a large amount of the asbestos has already been removed, various estimates put the amount of asbestos remaining at between 45 and 1,000 tons. The question is where will this asbestos go, and how will it be handled. Will adequate safety training and protective equipment be provided?

### **ILO Online: Shipbreaking activities have almost entirely moved to South and Southeast Asia, what are the reasons?**

**Paul Bailey:** Before Bangladesh, China, India, and Pakistan became the world's leading shipbreakers, vessels were taken apart where they were built: in industrialized countries. But high costs and environmental restrictions have driven shipowners to look elsewhere for a way of disposing these vessels. There are also technical reasons: strong tides and tapering beaches in India and Bangladesh mean that there is no need for costly dry docks.

### **ILO Online: What is the economic impact of shipbreaking in the**

**region?**

**Paul Bailey:** South Asian countries stepped in with a solution that also feeds the local economies. Before shipbreaking, Bangladesh, for example, imported all of its scrap steel. Today the wrecked ships satisfy 80 per cent of its needs. But scrap steel is not the only value imported from the gaping holds of these ships. Lining the streets close to the shipbreaking yards are various shops selling anything from bathtubs and toilets to boilers and generators removed from the ships after they are beached. The shipyard owners estimate around 200,000 Bangladeshis benefit indirectly from this business conducted on their shores. In India, the biggest shipbreaking nation, the figure is half a million.

**ILO Online: And the industry is likely to grow...**

**Paul Bailey:** Demand for shipbreaking services is likely to increase significantly in future years. The European Union (EU) approved a ban on single-hulled vessels in 2004 while the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has an advanced phase-out programme in place. These ships will ultimately have to be disposed of, and dismantling in one of the Asian shipbreaking yards is the most practical, cost-effective method. Nevertheless, we have a long way to go before all the necessary safety measures are in place which would permit dismantling in a more environmentally sound manner.

**ILO Online: What can be done to make shipbreaking decent work?**

**Paul Bailey:** Although the problem might seem insurmountable, there are a number of practical measures that can be taken, including providing training for the workers, safety equipment and hygienic living quarters. Workers alone will not be able to solve the problem. We need a global partnership of shipowners, shipbreakers, employers, trade unions and, of course, government inspectors who will see that these standards are enforced. This is yet again a test for globalization and decent work.

**ILO Online: What is the role of the ILO and other international agencies?**

**Paul Bailey:** Representatives of government, employers' and workers' organizations from heavyweight shipbreaking nations Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan and Turkey adopted ILO Guidelines on Safety and health in shipbreaking: Guidelines for Asian countries and Turkey ([Note 1](#)) for the industry in 2004. These measures will build on other recent positive developments in the form of international instruments aimed at ensuring a less hazardous and more decent work environment for those employed in one of the world's most dangerous occupations.

As far as asbestos and other toxins present on the ships are concerned, the ILO provides various solutions based on its international standards, including Conventions, Recommendations and Codes of Practice. The

ILO Conventions 139, 148, 162 and 170 on occupational cancer, working environment, safety in the use of asbestos, and safety in the use of chemicals have received 116 ratifications by the ILO member States.

### **ILO Online: What are the next steps?**

**Paul Bailey:** The next step will see the ILO carrying out consultations with national authorities in countries concerned, including an assessment and auditing process, as well as identifying areas where technical assistance may be provided to aid implementation. One project, funded by United Nations Development Programme, is currently underway in Bangladesh and some preparatory activities have been undertaken in India.

Basic knowledge is now available on better shipbreaking methods through the various sets of international guidelines on ship scrapping, especially in the ILO Guidelines on Safety and health in shipbreaking: Guidelines for Asian countries and Turkey. What is needed now is practical application and training on how to use them.

ILO, IMO and the Secretariat of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal also try to develop an integrated approach to regulation in this area. A Joint Working Group on ship scrapping concluded its second meeting last December. The Group discussed the development of a legally binding instrument on ship recycling which would provide global regulations on the design, construction, operation and preparation of ships so as to facilitate safe and environmentally sound recycling. In parallel to the development of a new international treaty on ship recycling, the possibility of establishing of an International Ship Recycling Fund is being explored to upgrade capacities of shipbreaking facilities.

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**Note 1** - *Safety and health in shipbreaking: Guidelines for Asian countries and Turkey*, ISBN 92-2-115289-8, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2004. Also available in Bengali, Chinese, Hindi and Turkish with an Urdu version in preparation.

Read French version of the guidelines here:

<http://www.ilo.org/public/french/standards/relm/gb/docs/gb289/pdf/meshs-1.pdf>

Read Spanish version of the guidelines here:

<http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/relm/gb/docs/gb289/pdf/meshs-1.pdf>

Special ILO documentary on the shipbreaking yards of India and Bangladesh also available:

*The Shipbreakers* (Video), ISBN 92-2-112328-6, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2000. Also available in French.

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