

SCRAPPING: INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Divided over progress on toxic waste

Global supporters of shipbreaking workers disagree with a leading cash buyer that standards are on the rise.

Geoff Garfield

London

Huge media outbursts at regular intervals mark the arrival of high-profile ships for scrapping on the beaches of the Indian subcontinent.

Typically they involve passenger ships such as the 20,000-gt *Platinum II* (ex-*Oceanic*, ex-*Independence*, built 1950) but more recently the 48,000-dwt tanker *Gulf Jash* (ex-*Probo Koala*, built 1989), which was turned away.

In between there are long lulls as though the problem of so-called toxic tonnage has disappeared — it has not.

Ships contain plenty of hazardous materials and waste whether it is asbestos, polychlorinated biphenyls (pcb) or simply oily sludge.

But times are changing and materials such as asbestos have been widely outlawed in vessel construction. The key issue now is guaranteeing that the many thousands of ships already built are scrapped responsibly.

All this is against the public perception of exploited labourers at recycling yards exposed to every danger imaginable, and for good reason, as death and injury has been commonplace and persists.

But not everywhere, argues Shashank Agrawal, legal advisor to one of the biggest cash buyers, Wirana. His previous employment with rival Global Marketing Systems (GMS) found him regularly giving the media a hard time for allegedly not recognising efforts on a company or national basis to raise standards in India.

He continues to be vocal since switching to Singapore-based Wirana, although it will take a lot to convince the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF),

whose representative in India, VV Rane, says plenty more is needed to protect the lives of shipbreaking workers.

The Brussels-based environmental pressure group NGO Platform on Shipbreaking has long argued that ship recycling in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (which combined with China and Turkey account for roughly 97% of the global business) should carry a massive health warning.

But Agrawal's stance is that a ship is only as toxic as the facilities, procedures and safeguards.

He says although Pakistan has made little progress in cleaning up its activities, improvements are now being kick-started in Bangladesh and India is four years into overhauling both facilities, practices and training.

The catalyst in India came in the shape of 2007 Supreme Court regulations borne out of the 76,000-gt former liner *Blue Lady* (ex-*Norway*, built 1961) legal case, safeguarding workers and which have been strictly followed, claims Agrawal.

It is now mandatory in India, for example, that ships are gas free for hotwork at the approximately 175 recycling yards in Alang and all hazardous materials declared.

If Agrawal is correct, every vessel is boarded while still anchored and subject to close inspection before the Gujarat Maritime Board (GMB) gives clearance for import. Simultaneously, customs checks ships for firearms and ammunition.

Certificates from a total of five agencies must be acquired, including from Gujarat Pollution Control, before customs accepts im-

port-duty payments. Recyclers at Alang genuinely fear being in contempt of the Supreme Court by flouting the regulations, it is claimed.

Livelihoods are at stake, says Agrawal. Inspectors, for example, are held "personally responsible" if potentially explosive residues are later discovered on board ships cleared for beaching.

Bribery is not unknown but the Wirana legal guru claims the brown-envelope syndrome is exaggerated.

"No matter how much money may be offered for the quick beaching of a ship, no explosives inspector would risk his job," he said. Jail and forfeiting government employment are too big a deterrent.

Agrawal and Rane differ on most points, including casualty figures.

Agrawal says he has not recorded a single death at Alang this year and only minor injuries.

Looking back, he holds a letter from the GMB for 1 April 2008 to 31 January 2009 stating that there were no fatalities or fires reported during that period, which followed the September 2007 Supreme Court case. Only "one minor injury", it is claimed, at a time when 75 yards were active at Alang and 197 were ships beached.

Missing, however, is the death of six workers when a fire broke out during breaking in mid-2009 of the 1,200-teu containership *MSC Jessica* (built 1980) and when the Ship Recycling Industries Association joint-secretary Nikhil Gupta was quoted as saying such accidents are "part and parcel" of the shipbreaking industry.

According to Mumbai-based Rane, deaths in Alang have totalled: 2006 (6), 2007 (6), 2008 (0), 2009 (17), 2010 (17) and so far in 2011 (4). In Mumbai, there were two yard deaths last year and four to date in 2011.

The workers' representative claims that as well as fatalities, between 75 and 125 people have suffered minor or major injuries.

He says the IMF has been trying to organise shipbreaking workers and "secure them justice in the matter of human rights, health, safety, welfare and environment".

Rane added: "It is a big task in the face of so many adverse conditions at the workplaces and apathy of government organisations and militancy of employers. The majority of workers are migrants.



INDIAN WORKERS: Shipbreaking underway at the Alang-Sosiya Shipbreaking yard in Bhavnagar district in May of this year (above and below) Photos: Scanpix

VV Rane: Claims there has been no major changes in what he alleges are "horrifying conditions" in the Indian yards.

We have been empowering them with all the resources at our command."

Rane claims there has been no major changes in what he alleges are "horrifying conditions" in the Indian yards. Efforts have started to tackle health, safety and environmental issues but a lot more needs to be done to protect lives.

Agrawal is far more generous in his comments, insisting that Supreme Court requirements are being fulfilled in the provision of materials-handling equipment, protective gear for workers, plans for oil removal, tank cleaning and waste disposal, as well as the clear identification of locations on ships likely to contain hazardous substances.

Only when workers have been trained and certified are they allowed to handle asbestos removal, he says. Today, cutting cannot start until the GMB inspector certifies a vessel is free of oil and sludge for which an inventory is drawn up and against which checks are made that such waste reaches nearby government-nominated sites and is not dumped en route.

Agrawal says at least 50 to 75

people at any one time are trained in asbestos removal to serve yards at Alang, although, unlike Turkey, it is organised on an individual rather than co-operative basis.

He points to regular and unannounced soil and water tests by the GMB to check against yard pollution and for which recyclers face the threat of temporary or permanent closure. If the situation was serious, then the fishing centre of Veraval also in Gujarat would not be so successful, says Agrawal.

According to Rane, however, social and welfare legislation is not always implemented, while new laws are needed. Shipbreaking players need to be made aware of the need to adopt both national and international health, safety and environmental standards "in the interest of sustainable development", he says.

A meeting had been held with the chairman of the Inter Ministerial Committee (IMC) constituted by the Indian government to supervise changes ordered by the Supreme Court at which it was stressed that "government machinery has to gear up".





Portable Tank Gauging and Sampling

"Restricted & Closed"
(petroleum & chemical)



MMC Int'l Corp. (USA) | MMC Europe Ltd. (UK) | MMC Asia Ltd. (Japan)
 Fax: (516) 371-3134 | Fax: (01670) 738789 | Fax: (078) 252-0265
 www.mmcintl.com • E-mail: mmcinwd@aol.com • 1-800-645-7339