

fidh

International Federation for Human Rights



In cooperation with the International
Platform on Shipbreaking



PRESS KIT

CHILDBREAKING YARDS

Child Labour in the Ship Recycling Industry in Bangladesh

Article I: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Article II: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (...) Article III: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Article IV: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Article V: No one shall be subjected to torture or to or degrading treatment or



Introduction

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Young Power in Social Action (YPSA-Bangladesh) in cooperation with the International NGO Platform on Shipbreaking¹ publish a fact-finding mission report entitled **“Childbreaking Yards: Child labour in the ship recycling industry in Bangladesh”**.

Alerted as to the number of children working in the shipbreaking yards, FIDH and YPSA decided to jointly investigate on this issue. The report is based on field research carried out in and around shipbreaking yards in Chittagong, as well as in Northern Bangladesh villages, where many child workers come from. The report does not give any statistical evidence of the phenomenon, which is impossible to provide in the absence of official figures and would require a long-term research, which would actually be very difficult to carry out due to the severe restrictions on access to the yards. However, the authors of the report estimate that 25% of the workforce on the yards are children. With *Childbreaking Yards*, FIDH and YPSA draw for the first time a comprehensive description of child labour in Chittagong’s shipbreaking yards. Through testimonies and pictures, the purpose of *Childbreaking Yards* is not only to denounce child labour but also to shed light on the socio-economic context that pushes children into such a hazardous activity.

1. The International NGO Platform on Shipbreaking is a coalition of organisations defending environmental and human rights. The members are: Basel Action Network (BAN), Greenpeace, La fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’Homme (FIDH), la fédération européenne des transports et de l’environnement (T&E), Bellona, the North Sea Foundation, the Ban Asbestos Network, Prevention of Hazardous Shipbreaking Initiative Turkey, Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), Toxic Links, Gujarat Occupational Safety and Health Association and the Corporate Accountability Desk India.

Some Facts

Bangladesh

50 % of the population below the poverty line.

50 % children under 5 showing signs of chronic malnutrition (World Bank data).

Child Labour in Bangladesh

7.9 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 years old are working (BBS survey on Child labour, 2003).

1.3 million are working 43 hours or more per week.

20 % is the usual proportion that children contribute to the family income.

75 % of childworkers are boys.

More than one million children are working in risky jobs.

Shipbreaking

60 % of the large ocean vessels dismantled in 2007 were processed in Bangladesh.

30 000 workers directly employed in shipbreaking and between **100 000** and **200 000** indirectly.

Ship scrapping provides **30%** of the Bangladesh’s steel needs

An estimate **25%** of the workforce on the yards are children

Hazardous activity

(those facts are estimates since there is no official data)

Hundreds of workers died in the last decades, and thousands have been injured

NGOs have been able to document that at least **18** workers died in the last two years (2006–2007). **10** workers died in 2008.



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Summary of the report

Shipbreaking is a key industry in Bangladesh and a highly hazardous activity. It attracts extremely poor farmers and migrant workers, as working in the yards provides them with higher income than agricultural work. Accidents occur on a daily basis on the yards, leaving many workers severely injured and some dead. The health of the workers is also affected as a result of exposure to hazardous substances contained in the ships and of the unsafe conditions in the yards. Working in those conditions is even worse for children lacking physical strength, and still growing.

Causes of child labour at shipbreaking yards

Poverty is one of the main factor explaining the high rate of childworkers on the yards. Loss of land, often linked to erosion, can lead one member of the family including a child to travel to Chittagong to seek a job. The disappearance of the father (death, abandonment of the family), creating a financial crisis may also lead to the older son being sent to the yards to sustain the family.

Families indebted by a wedding are sometimes forced to sell their lands or cattle or borrow money from neighbors. Testimonies collected during the mission revealed that in a number of cases micro-credit from NGOs has been the reason for parents to take their

children out of school and send them to work on the yards. These loans easily obtained without appropriate control and follow-up, are often less flexible than loans obtained from other villagers, the repayment is more strict and they impose high interest rates to villagers regardless of their financial situation.

Aside those financial reasons, it appears that the ease to obtain a job without experience and qualification and the higher salary in yards than in other occupation make them attractive for childworkers.

Ajub, 15, is from the Moheshkali Island facing the southern city of Cox's Bazaar. *"When my father died seven years ago my mother tried to feed my younger sister and me. She was farming but it wasn't enough. I was 8 when I started working at the salt factory. I worked there for 7 years but when seven months ago a foreman came to the village and offered a job with double my pay I left for Chittagong. I'm now working as a loader. I'm the only income for the family. Every week I send 300 to 400 takas through a mobile phone shop in the village. In fact from here I recharge a mobile number belonging to the village shop and its owner gives the money to my mother."*

Nuramol, 12, arrived from Comilla two weeks earlier: *“We had mortgaged our land to pay my sister’s wedding. Then, to get back the land and cultivate it my father took 20,000 takas loans with two NGOs. Of course, to obtain the loans, my father didn’t tell the truth to the NGOs. My first money here at the yard will help me to pay back my train ticket and my equipment. After, I will send regularly money to help my father to pay for the loans”.*

Current practices in the yards

Some of the children are hired locally but foremen also visit poor villages to recruit children. They usually hire boys since the working force is close to 100% male. They rarely hire boys under 10 years old because they lack the required physical strength for the job. According to several local sources with a long experience at the yards, around 10% of the workers are under 12 years old. Sometimes, the children come to Chittagong’s yards with a relative.

Most of the children interviewed were working as cutter helpers (assist cutters using gaz torches to cut up pieces of iron), some were « sweepers » (remove mud from all the slices or segments of the ship), a few of them were in charge of chains and cables used to move parts of the ship (carrying heavy cables) or in charge of carrying steel plates and other pieces of the ship and loading them onto the trucks that deliver them to buyers.

Children work with no appropriate protection and they are subject to the sun and the fumes. The workers spend normally 12 hours a day at the yards, most of them have roughly one hour break for lunch and two tea breaks during the day. Some workers work at night. They have a half day off on Friday afternoon, but most of the children interviewed said they do not work everyday because they are too tired, injured or sick.

The children complained about the pains they suffer while working and about being regularly sick (headaches, dizziness...) because of the toxic environment. There is not any single day without disease, injury or even death.

Jowel, 14, cutter helper: *“Regularly, I can’t eat anything because I have swallowed too much fume. When you have gas inside your body, you can’t eat,” “My eyes are crying. When I come back to my room, often I can’t eat because of the strong pain.”*

The children victim of an accident that leaves them with a serious injury cannot work at the yards anymore, they are sent back to their homes and often become a burden for their families. Workers are often sent back to their village before the end of their treatment without compensation.

The children originally from Chittagong usually live with their parents in small houses, the children who have migrated are housed in dormitories located next to the yards where there is no running water and where the electricity is rare.

Under the national Labour Act of 2006, no child under 14 shall be employed in any establishment or profession. However, the law is not being enforced, and the Labour inspection has not filed any case regarding child labour in the yards. The International Labour Organisation Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour ratified by Bangladesh imposes an obligation to “take immediate steps and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency”, children meaning under 18 years old.

The report, *Childbreaking Yards, Child Labour in the Ship Recycling Industry in Bangladesh*, will be on FIDH’s website on Tuesday 16 September 2008.



About Shipbreaking

After 25 to 30 years ships are at the end of their operational life. These ‘end-of-life’ vessels are sold and dismantled to recover valuable steel. However, ships also contain large amounts of hazardous materials. Shipbreaking today occurs mostly in yards on the beaches of South Asian countries.

Bangladesh, as well as India and Pakistan, offer low operating costs because of cheap labour, absence of expensive machinery, but also, disregard for labour and environmental standards. This situation will be aggravated by the number of ships going out of service in the next few years following the global phase out of single hull oil tankers; the large estimated backlog of old vessels still operating because of high freight rates; and the general boom in shipbuilding over the last years.

The toxic wastes on board ‘end-of-life’ vessels are being freely traded without restraint in the global market place. The costs of ensuring that these wastes are recovered and disposed of without polluting and endangering human health are today being external-

ised to the workers and the environment in South Asian developing countries. This is illegal according to international law and in deep contrast to well established principle “polluter pays”.

Legal framework on Shipbreaking

The Basel Convention on the Control of Trans-boundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal (BC) was initiated in response to numerous international scandals regarding hazardous waste trafficking that began to occur in the late 1980s. The Convention is relevant for ship dismantling, as ships often contain large amounts of hazardous materials. In 2002, the BC adopted Technical Guidelines for the Environmentally Sound Management (ESM) of the Full and Partial Dismantling of Ships, a document directed at countries which already have or are establishing facilities involved in ship dismantling.

In December 2003, the **International Maritime Organisation (IMO)** issued a document entitled “Guidelines on Ship Recycling”. Developed as best practice guidelines and to give advice to all stakeholders in the recycling process, including administrators of shipbuilding and maritime equipment, supplying countries, flag, and port and recycling states, as well as inter governmental organizations and commercial bodies such as ship-owners, repairers and recycling yards.

The International Maritime Organisation is currently negotiating a new global mandatory convention on ship recycling which will replace the Basel Convention on shipbreaking issues if it is considered by the Basel Parties that the new IMO convention has at least an “equivalent level of control” as that currently found in the Basel Convention. However, the draft IMO Convention is currently so weak that it places no substantial obligations or incentives for shipbreaking countries or ship owners to improve upon the status quo, it represents a clear setback in relation to the current international legal framework.

The **International Labour Organisation (ILO)** issued in 2004 a set of guidelines to govern the disposal and recycling of ships. Guidelines suggest a national framework defining the general responsibilities and rights for employers, workers and regulatory authorities in shipbreaking, and provide recommendations on safe shipbreaking operations including the management of hazardous substances, protection and preventative measures for workers against hazards and suggestions for a competency based training program.



PREVIOUS REPORTS

• FIDH fact-finding mission report 2002, *Where do floating dustbins end up? Labour Rights in Shipbreaking Yards in South Asia The cases of Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Alang (India)*

In this report, FIDH shed light on shipbreaking which exemplifies both the potentialities and the dangers of an increasingly globalised economy. Shipbreaking provides employment for tens of thousands of workers throughout the Asian continent; it also provides for large quantities of steel, and thus acts as an alternative to the non-renewable resource of ore, while representing an important source of supply for second-hand equipment. At the same time, this delocalisation exposes workers in developing countries to dangers that would be unacceptable in industrialised countries, and sets far lesser standards than the internationally agreed ones in terms of rights at work: in effect, it creates two classes of workers. National governments of the countries where the yards are situated hold ultimate responsibility for protecting the rights of workers; but the various private or semi-public operators along the chain cannot be exonerated, and should also be held responsible for the conditions in which they sell their ships.

• End-of-life ships, a joint Greenpeace/FIDH report

In 2005, FIDH and Greenpeace, in cooperation with YPSA published a fact-finding mission report entitled *End of life ships, the human costs of breaking ships*. This report provided an indepth look into the human rights and environmental impacts of this activity in Alang, India and Chittagong in Bangladesh. The report gave a face to the victims of this activity, describing the causes of death on the yards, from accidents to occupational toxicity problems due to exposure to asbestos and other toxic substances. Following this report, a campaign denouncing the dismantling of the French aircraft carrier the *Clemenceau* in Alang was succesful in bringing back the ship to France.



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ABOUT US

FIDH takes action for the protection of victims of human rights violations, for the prevention of violations and to bring perpetrators to justice. FIDH has a broad mandate, working for the respect of all the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an international network gathering today 155 member organisations in more than 100 countries around the world. FIDH coordinates and supports their activities and provides them with a voice at the international level and is an independent organisation with no link to any party or religion and is independent of all governments.

www.fidh.org

YPSA, Young Power in Social Action, is a social development organisation that started in 1985 in Bangladesh. It aims to promote sustainable development through a holistic approach. YPSA follows the issues related to workers rights, tries to obtain improved working conditions at Chittagong shipbreaking yards and does advocacy for a policy to ensure human rights in the shipbreaking industry. In addition to awareness raising activities and research publications about the subject, YPSA also provides instant help to injured shipbreaking workers and families of the dead workers along with different development programs for the villages surrounding the yards.

www.ypsa.org

www.shipbreakingbd.info

The NGO Platform on Shipbreaking is a coalition of environmental, human and labour rights organisations first created in September 2005 after it was realised by some of the few NGOs working on the issue that a broader base of support both geographically and in orientation was needed to challenge the political clout of the global shipping industry. Due to increased political momentum, in part generated by the Platform itself, the coalition has evolved already from being a European Platform to a global one, including NGOs based in the largest shipbreaking countries, India and Bangladesh. The Platform is now also recognised at the Basel Convention and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) as the preeminent international NGO advocacy organisation on this critical subject.

www.shipbreakingplatform.com



person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty. Article III: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Article III: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Article IV: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Article IV: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Article V: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Article VI: Everyone has the right to recognition every- where as a person be-

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