

'START' SHIP RECYCLING IN BRITAIN

Background

Greenpeace has been campaigning on the issue of shipbreaking for almost 10 years. The campaign has centred on scrapping yards in Bangladesh, Pakistan and in particular the yard in Alang, India. Alang is situated in Gujarat province, in the North West corner of India, 300 miles North of Mumbai on India's North West coast.

What is shipbreaking?

After an average of 25-30 years (normally slightly longer for naval vessels) ships are at the end of their sailing life. These 'End of Life Vessels' are sold and dismantled to recover the valuable steel. About 95% of the ship consists of steel, but they also contain large amounts of hazardous materials.

In the 1970s shipbreaking was concentrated in Europe. Performed at docks, it was a highly mechanised industrial operation. But the costs of upholding environmental, health and safety standards increased. So the shipping industry moved to poorer Asian states, that have few health and safety standards

Every year around 600-700 larger sea vessels are taken out of service and taken to Asia for scrap. In the 1990s they had an aggregate tonnage of around 15 million dead weight tonnes (dwt) a year. In 2001 the total number of vessels (608) sold for scrap totalled 28 million dwt. (Source E.A. Gibson Shipbrokers).

How are ships scrapped in Asia?

Ships are scrapped by poor workers earning between US \$1.50 and \$2.50 per day. They break the ships with torch cutters and their bare hands - unprotected from toxic substances, explosions and falling steel. Many are injured or killed by suffocation or explosions. Many are expected to contract cancer due to asbestos dust. According to a European Commission report, "manual, low paid workers are allowed to dismantle the ships without the provision of safety equipment, and scant attention is paid to health and safety issues or training. Injuries and deaths are common place". ([Commission of the European Communities Technological and Economic Feasibility Study of Ship Scrapping in Europe. Report no. 2000-3527 Revision no. 01, 2001](#))

Most of the ships dismantled today were built in the 1970's, prior to the banning of hazardous materials like PCBs and asbestos. On the Asian beaches these toxic substances are released into the environment and

workers' bodies. If not regulated properly, the shipbreaking industry can be one of the most deadly in the world.

Asbestos

Exposure to asbestos fibres through inhalation may cause cancer and asbestosis. On the shipbreaking beaches of Asia asbestos fibres and flocks fly around in the open air. Men take out asbestos insulation materials with their bare hands. They dry it in the sun, so they can sell it.

Asbestos dust causes formation of scar-like tissues in the lungs. This results in permanent breathing difficulties such as asbestosis. In the longer term it can lead to mesothelioma which is a cancer of the thin membrane surrounding the lungs.

UK naval ships scrapped in India

The Ministry of Defence has sold UK naval ships to scrap merchants which then ended up in India. In 2000 two Royal Naval vessels – the 'Olwen' and the 'Olva' (1) ended up being broken on the beaches at Alang in India. This was after the ships were rejected by the Turkish Government because of the levels of toxic material onboard (2). Environmental safeguards are non-existent in Alang and there is almost no safety equipment for a workforce that includes children. The ships were originally sold to German Shipbreaking Company Eckhardt, who sold the ships on.

The UK Government owns 107 large vessels comprising 3 aircraft carriers, 1 amphibious ship, 11 destroyers, 21 frigates, 22 mine counter measure vehicles, 23 patrol vessels, 1 ice patrol vessel, 3 hydrographic vessels and 22 auxiliaries.

Currently HMS Intrepid (3) – an amphibious landing vessel – is berthed at Portsmouth awaiting a decision about its disposal. HMS Intrepid contains 40 tonnes of asbestos as well as PCBs, lead and heavy fuel oil (4).

UK Shipping Register

More than 1,700 vessels weighing over 100 gross tonnes, are listed on the UK shipping register. 800 of these are over 500 gross tonnes. The UK derives significant economic benefit from shipping interests. Despite this, UK ships are not currently decommissioned or recycled in the UK but are sent to places like Alang in order to save costs. The UK vessel the Genova Bridge was beached in Alang, India in November 2003

START Ship Recycling in Britain

Peter Mandelson MP, Greenpeace and the GMB call on the UK Government to:

- UK Government to support the development of purpose-designed and built, state of the art ship recycling facilities in Britain.
- An immediate public commitment that British Government owned vessels will be entirely recycled within the EU at state of the art facilities. This commitment could be made immediately and should include HMS Intrepid.
- The Government should seek to persuade British ship owners to recycle their vessels at state of the art facilities within the EU and must urgently explore ways of compelling all EU ship owners to dispose of their ships at such facilities.

Notes

1) Before being taken out of service the Olwen and Olna were the two oldest and largest fast fleet tankers in the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries (RFA) flotilla, having entered RFA service in 1965 and 1966 respectively. Known as O class fuel replenishment ships, They were used for refuelling and re-supplying navy ships at sea. They last put to sea in July 1999 and November 1999 respectively. They were replaced by two new large fleet tanker ships RFA Wave Knight, the Wave Class, built by BAE Systems for the United Kingdom Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Wave Knight was commissioned in March 2003 and Wave Ruler in April 2003.

2) The Olwen and Olna were bought by a German company called Eckhardt. The ships left the port of Portsmouth in the UK in February 2001 and were sold by Eckhardt to a Turkish scrap yard. The Turkish Ministry of Environment prohibited the import of the ships. Eckhardt then towed the ships to a Greek port, renamed them Kea and Kos and moved them through the Suez Canal to Alang in India where they arrived in July 2001.

3) HMS "Intrepid" is an amphibious landing vessel, built in 1967 by John Brown & Co. (Clydebank) Ltd. The vessel has been laid up since the early '90s and is currently berthed at HMNB Portsmouth. According to information leaked to Greenpeace, a 2001 British Navy inventory of asbestos on HMS "Intrepid" reportedly found asbestos throughout the vessel, including asbestos insulation on pipework throughout the ship and the insulation on the 2 funnels. Further finds were in starter boxes, flange gaskets, deck-head lighting, electrical heaters and fire curtains.

4) Source for statistics: Ministry of Defence.