

## 46 workers killed on the shipbreaking yards of South Asia this year

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Every year, on December 12<sup>th</sup>, Bangladesh commemorates the lives of the workers that have died while working on the dirty and extremely dangerous shipbreaking yards of South Asia. Hundreds of shipbreaking yard workers have died on the job throughout these past 30 years. According to available information, in these past 14 months alone there have been 46 reported deaths on the shipbreaking yards of the beaches of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Many other deaths go unnoticed because they are either covered up by corrupt shipbreaking yard owners or are a result of long-term disease brought on by the workers' constant exposure to hazardous waste such as asbestos, PCBs, heavy metals, mercury, and oil residues. This commemoration day for the victims of the shipbreaking industry is an initiative of Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), a local NGO based in Chittagong and member of the NGO Shipbreaking Platform, a global coalition of environmental, human and labour rights non-governmental organisations working for safe and clean ship recycling. Shipbreaking has been called one of the most dangerous professions in the world by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The shipbreaking yards in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan do not observe minimum international standards for occupational health and safety. According to Platform members Greenpeace, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and YPSA, there is an average of an accident a day and a death a week on these shipbreaking yards. Causes of death and accidents on the yards are explosions, fire, suffocation and falling steel plates. The beaching practice in which the ships are broken is also extremely dangerous because the soft sand on which the breaking is done cannot support emergency and heavy lifting equipment, like cranes. *"On the shipbreaking yards of Bangladesh occupational health and safety precautions do not exist,"* says Muhammed Ali Shahin, the Bangladesh Coordinator of the NGO Shipbreaking Platform. *"All the shipbreaking work, from cutting to loading, is conducted manually. Most of the workers are migrant men coming from some of the poorest regions in Bangladesh for seasonal work. They are treated like machines; if one dies another will replace him. There is no complete recording of accidents or deaths at the shipbreaking yards; dead and non-identified workers still get thrown into the sea, leaving a widow and children with no news and no income."* Also, since the majority of workers work without contracts on the shipbreaking yards, the owners can refuse to recognize the person as a worker from their yard to not pay their medical fees nor compensation to them or their families. The working conditions on these yards can be compared to slavery. Unions' rights are de facto extremely restricted on the yards. Wages are low (less than 2 Euros per day), leaving the workers with barely enough money to eat let alone send to their families. Child labour is also common on these yards - in Bangladesh, 20% of the work force is under 15 years of age. Though the workers work on a daily basis with hazardous materials, protective equipment is scarce or non-existent. They work barefoot or in flip-flops, with no helmets, safety goggles nor gas masks. The average life span of these workers is of 40 years (20 years less than the average Bangladeshi man) due to their constant exposure to toxic waste, which often leads to diseases like lung cancer and asbestosis. It has been estimated that between accidents and long term disease, the total death toll in the yards now runs into the thousands.

The NGO Shipbreaking Platform condemns these deaths, particularly those in Bangladesh that have taken place in spite of High court orders from March 2009, upheld by the Supreme court, aimed at cleaning up the industry. The orders were given after a long, successful legal battle initiated and led by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), an NGO Shipbreaking Platform member. The orders directed the shipbreaking yards to produce environmental certificates and pre-cleaning reports of the scrap ships for dismantling and also banned the import of obsolete vessels that had not been decontaminated in their country of export – all of which have not been respected by the industry.

*"The lack of enforcement of international, regional and national environmental and labour laws has let the South Asian shipbreaking industry perpetuate a human disaster that can no longer be ignored and must be stopped."* says Grazia Cioci, Acting Director and Senior Policy Officer of the NGO Shipbreaking Platform. *"Unfortunately, the call from the Bangladeshi magistrates and advocates who struggle to regulate the shipping and shipbreaking industries in their country has not been taken up by the international and European institutions, which still hesitate to take a strong stand against the beaching practice"*.

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