

Bangladesh to become ship graveyard if nothing is done

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10 March 2011 - In a judgment on Monday, 7 March 2011, the Bangladesh High

Court granted temporary permission to shipbreaking yard owners to resume importing toxic ships for breaking on the beaches near Chittagong, Bangladesh. The Court order includes various conditions that must be fulfilled before the yards can resume the actual breaking of the ships. The Court seems to be steering the shipbreaking industry in the right direction, and many of the requirements are welcomed steps towards ensuring bettered conditions at the shipbreaking yards. But the Platform warns that the judgment's effect may be catastrophic because the changes will not be structural, but merely cosmetic. Understanding what the Court order actually implies has left many confused. Bangladeshi shipbreaking yards will be allowed to import the ships but will not be allowed to start breaking them until all conditions are met. While some of the Court's conditions, such as setting up compulsory training courses for workers and banning child labour are a decisive step forward, the order fails to address the overarching issue of beaching. It is very important to underline that breaking toxic ships directly on the shifting grounds of tidal beaches can never be done in a safe and environmentally-sound way. Beaches cannot support the weight of cranes or emergency equipment, making it a very risky work environment. The dangerous pollutants released from the ships seep into the sand and into the water, destroying the ecosystems and the livelihoods of locals. Additionally, toxic materials are still being allowed into Bangladesh, which is illegal and ignores Bangladesh's obligations as Party to the Basel Convention. This exact issue, concerning the ore-cleaning of ships, remains pending in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. Two earlier rulings have stated that only toxic free end-of-life ships are allowed to enter Bangladesh. In the meantime, following the judgment of March 7th 2011, many more obsolete toxic ships will be beached on the coasts of Bangladesh, turning the beaches into ship graveyards. Or worse, illegal breaking will spin out of control as the parties involved will look for ways to do business as usual. The NGO Shipbreaking Platform remains optimistic however that the Appellate division of the Supreme Court will distinguish between exploitation and employment, profiteering from the long-term welfare of Bangladesh and put a halt to this dirty and dangerous practice that is shipbreaking on the beach. In the meantime, ship owners need to be aware that any sales to Bangladeshi shipbreakers today will turn beaches into ever-growing graveyards of toxic ships and will only worsen an ongoing human rights and environmental disaster.