

Children are breaking up the world fleet

2008-09-16 18:09:00 Shipbreaking



16 September 2008 - Alerted as to the number of children working in the shipbreaking yards in Bangladesh, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Young Power in Social Action (YPSA-Bangladesh) in cooperation with the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking publish today a report shocking entitled « Childbreaking Yards: Child labour in the ship recycling industry in Bangladesh ». 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 one of the world's most hazardous jobs. The report estimates that as many as one out of four workers on the shipbreaking beaches of Bangladesh are children. Shipbreaking in South Asia is a dirty, degrading and extremely dangerous job. Wearing no protection, workers are exposed to hazardous substances such as asbestos, PCBs, heavy metals and oil residues. Accidents occur on a daily basis, leaving many workers severely injured. Death can come suddenly, from the crush of a falling steel plate or by being blown to bits when cutting torches set off residual fuels. Desperate for any job because they have lost their land to flooding, families in the North of Bangladesh are forced to send their young boys to earn a living at the yards in Chittagong. They know it is dangerous, but poverty leaves them with no choice. Foremen visit these poor villages in the North to recruit young boys. Though they lack experience, children easily obtain a job at the yards - they are cheap labour. According to several local sources at least 10% of the workers are under 12 years old. The children are housed in dormitories located next to the yard, often only being given a metal plate to sleep on. They complain about the pains they suffer while working and about being regularly sick (headaches, dizziness...) because of the toxic environment. The risk of cancer due to the constant exposure to toxic fumes and asbestos fibres is high, so is the risk of becoming severely injured – as high as the chance of getting compensation from the yard owner is low.

Illegal practice

Under the Bangladeshi Labour Act of 2006, it is forbidden to employ children under 14. The law is clearly not being enforced, yet no Labour Inspector has filed a single case denouncing the exploitation of child workers at the yards. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour is ratified by Bangladesh and 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. Shipbreaking as carried out on the tidal beaches of Chittagong is characterised as one of the most hazardous jobs in the world by the ILO. The export of hazardous ships from wealthy shipping companies to some of the poorest communities in the world is also illegal according to international law and in deep contrast to the well established principle « polluter pays ». “Poverty is forcing children into one of the world most dangerous jobs, they do not want to be there. It is high time that Bangladeshi authorities take action to ensure a better future for these young boys. It is also high time that the governments of wealthy shipping nations stop this shameful exploitation of cheap labour – children should not be dismantling the world fleet of toxic ships”, said Mohammed Ali Shahin from YPSA. [Childbreaking Yards : Child labour in the Ship Recycling Industry in Bangladesh - September 2008](#)