

India ignores international law

2006-08-15 18:08:52 Shipbreaking

15 August 2006 - The SS Norway, recently renamed Blue Lady, has been beached at the shipbreaking yards of Alang, India. It is the largest End of Life ship that arrived in Alang since the aircraft carrier Clemenceau was forced to return to France. For more than a year environmental and human rights organisations tried to prevent the scrapping of the SS Blue Lady. The former ocean liner is thought to contain 1240 tonnes of asbestos and hundreds of tonnes of other materials contaminated with PCBs.

Dead workers

Alang does not have the facilities to properly manage these hazardous materials. Its shipbreaking yards are notorious for their unsafe working conditions: one worker per day dies in Alang. They are burned alive by sudden explosions and fires from flammable residues. Or they die from chronic and terminal illnesses following exposure to hazardous chemicals and asbestos.

Supreme Court

India is a party to the international Basel Convention, that strictly controls the international movement of hazardous waste. Therefore all ships that want to enter India must first be properly inventoried, pre-cleaned and stripped of all hazardous materials, according to a Supreme Court ruling in October 2003. However, in the case of the Blue Lady, the Supreme Court has remained quiet.

Circumventing international law

Star Cruises Ltd is the beneficial owner of the SS Blue Lady. This company was made aware of the environmental and human rights disaster following the breaking of the toxic vessel on Indian beaches. Yet the ship owner knowingly circumvented the Basel Convention by first claiming the ship was not to be scrapped, but re-used as a floating casino (and thus no waste under the law).

Political aid

Indian politicians aided Star Cruises Ltd to dump the Blue Lady, ignoring international law. The Blue Lady will generate 5.3-6.4 million dollars for the State Government from recycled steel revenue. So the Ministry of Environment endorsed the rapid beaching of the End of Life ship in Alang, after an official inspection team visited the ship. These officials admitted the presence of asbestos and PCBs, yet they failed to quantify the hazardous substances or identify the locations.

Critique

Furthermore the question was not addressed whether the Alang yards were (technically) capable of managing these dangerous materials and protect their workers. Still the conclusion of the committee was that Alang could handle all hazards found on board. The critique published by the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking was ignored, along with the 2003 Supreme Court order.