



enceau's passage; shortly thereafter the French President recalled the ship. On May 17, 2006, the ship returned to its home port after its fruitless US\$38 million 12,000 mile quest to find an Asian scrapyards willing to decommission it. The inability of international treaties and national laws to prevent the global trade in toxic waste, which was exposed by the *Clemenceau* debacle, has led to renewed efforts to engage with regional authorities such as the European Union to ensure that there is a clampdown on such illegal practices.

Despite the success achieved with the *Clemenceau*, business in Alang's scrapyards is booming. From November 2006-January 2007 a total of 47 ships arrived for scrapping; January's figure of 24 marked a two year high and signifies an increase in Alang's workload from the measly 32 ships which arrived in the five months between June to October 2006.⁶⁶ Ship-breaking commentators say that the strength of the steel market in Alang and political turmoil in Bangladesh are responsible; Alang is receiving small (5,000 tonne) and mid-sized (12-15,000 tonne) tankers from the Gulf countries.

Ship-breaking in Bangladesh

For more than 20 years, commercial ship-breaking operations have been carried out in Bangladesh; on average 180-250 ships a year are scrapped at 35 yards directly employing 50,000 individuals and indirectly employing 80,000. The work in these yards is labor intensive and carries no job security or social security protection; non-unionized, illiterate local migrants who make up 98% of the workforce have no knowledge of the asbestos hazard. Occupational accidents, injuries and deaths as well as hazardous exposures to a myriad of toxins occur on a daily basis.

There are many natural and political reasons for the growth of ship-breaking in Bangladesh. The coastline is suitable for the beaching of large vessels and the geographical isolation of the shipyards prevents social monitoring of working conditions. The availability of cheap labor, the low cost of machinery and the lack of health and safety legislation keep operating costs low. The resale value of material reclaimed from the ships is high:

- re-rolling mills process reclaimed scrap iron;
- shops sell old ships' furniture;
- reclaimed asbestos sheet materials are reused;
- second-hand electric equipment and materials are sold as are redundant sanitary equipment, kitchen machinery and cooking appliances.

The removal of and disposal of asbestos waste is unregulated in Bangladesh and the manual crushing and reuse of asbestos from ships is common.

National mobilization on the asbestos threat has been spurred by the actions of the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE)⁶⁷ which is campaigning for a global and national ban on the import of asbestos and asbestos-contaminated ships, a ban on the reuse of redundant asbestos-containing products, government regulation, periodic workplace inspections, compensation and support for asbestos victims. As part of this remit, the OSHE and the Asian Monitor Resources Center organized a conference in Agrabad, Chittagang on December 15-16, 2006. This small informal gathering drew together occupational health experts, community activists, trade unionists and scientists from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Japan who, amongst other issues, considered: asbestos exposures in power plants in India, the asbestos hazards in the ship-breaking industry, asbestos politics in Asia and the development of asbestos victims groups and NGOs in South Asia. Indian delegate Gopal Krishna reported that the sessions in Bangladesh were both informative and productive and included a visit to shipyards where people were observed working in an asbestos-laden atmosphere with no health and safety precautions.

In collaboration with the Netherlands Confederation of Trade Unions the OSHE has embarked on a project to: raise asbestos awareness amongst ship-breaking workers, empower local trade unions to be actively engaged in the social debate on asbestos with government and company officials and develop procedures and regulations to safeguard occupational health and safety. To heighten public awareness, in April 2007 the OSHE commemorated International Workers' Memorial Day at events held in the capital city including:



- April 27: a workshop: *Making Decent Work a Reality in Bangladesh* followed by a press conference which launched a national appeal to ban asbestos;
- April 28: a public discussion on "ban asbestos" at the OSHE Center in Shitakunda, Chittagong.⁶⁸