“Each year, more than” 1000 “ocean-going vessels reach the end of their service life and are broken down to recover steel. Yet, only a fraction is handled in a safe and sustainable manner. More than 80% of all end-of-life ships are simply run ashore on tidal beaches in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Poor and unskilled migrant workers are deployed by the thousands to break down the ships manually. The ships are full of toxics such as asbestos, lead, PCBs and heavy metals. The toxic wastes sicken the workers and ravage coastal ecosystems. As the muddy sand and shifting grounds of tidal beaches cannot support heavy lifting equipment or safety gear, accidents injure or kill hundreds of workers each year” (NGO Shipbreaking Platform 2012).

“Causes of death at the shipbreaking yards in South Asia include explosions, fire, suffocation and accidents caused by extremely heavy steel beams and plates which fall and crush workers under their weight. The constant exposure to toxic materials and fumes is the source of many diseases, including cancer. The average lifespan of a South Asian shipbreaking worker is alarmingly low: 40 years” (NGO Shipbreaking Platform n.d.). The shipbreaking yards in South Asia do not provide sustainable and safe down-stream waste management of hazardous substances, i.e. practices such as smoldering cables or the re-use of asbestos are widely practiced.

Shipbreaking in South Asia today is taking place at the cost of environmental destruction and health risks for workers and for the population confronted with hazardous wastes: the industry is not sustainable and South Asian states will not benefit from these practices on the long run. Moreover, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, to which India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are parties, and the Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, which will in the future regulate environmentally safe and sound ship recycling, set out requirements for sustainable practices. If South Asian states want to maintain the industry and be able to compete with other ship recycling countries such as China, they must promote sustainable technologies and practices for shipbreaking such as facilities off the beaches, proper downstream waste management and safe working conditions.

The panel will explore the following issues:

- current situation of the shipbreaking industry in Pakistan
- major environmental and workers’ rights issues at Gadani yards;
- comparison between different South Asian facilities;
- steps taken in India and Bangladesh (such as recent court judgments);
- Pakistan’s compliance with international conventions and findings of World Bank report;
- challenges imposed by shipbreaking in Pakistan in particular and South Asia in general and concrete policy recommendations.

References:


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