



NGO platform
on shipbreaking



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India Continues to Ignore International Law and own Supreme Court Order to Keep Shipbreakers in Business

15 August 2006 (New Delhi) – The former ocean liner SS Norway (recently renamed Blue Lady) has been beached at India's Alang shipbreaking yards, despite a long campaign by environmental and human rights organisations to prevent the scrapping of the ship which is thought to contain 1240 tonnes of asbestos and hundreds of tonnes of other materials contaminated with toxic persistent organic pollutants known as polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs. It is well known that Alang does not have the facilities to properly manage these hazardous materials.

The shipbreaking yards of Alang, in Gujarat State, India are notorious for their unsafe working conditions. It has been estimated that one worker per day dies in these yards either from sudden explosions and fires from flammable residues, set off by handheld cutting torches combined with non-existent or inadequate protection for workers. Many workers - often hired by the day for cash-in-hand - also die from chronic and terminal illnesses such as asbestosis and cancers following exposure to hazardous chemicals and asbestos during the shipbreaking process.

The international Basel Convention to which India is a Party, strictly controls the movement across borders of hazardous wastes has called for a total ban on exports of these wastes from developed to developing countries. For this reason the Supreme Court of India had demanded in 2003 that all ships must be first properly inventoried, pre-cleaned and stripped of all hazardous materials prior to entry into India. However, in this case, the Supreme Court has remained quiet.

Star Cruises Ltd, the beneficial owner of the SS Blue Lady, has several times been made aware of the environmental and human rights disaster dumping the toxic vessel on Indian breaking beaches will lead to [1]. It is believed that Star Cruises Ltd knowingly circumvented the Basel Convention by first claiming the ship was not to be scrapped but rather re-used as a floating casino, meaning that technically the ship was not a waste under the law. Meanwhile the Ministry of Environment and Forests in India has seemingly ignored international law, and endorsed the rapid beaching of the ship in Alang. It is expected that the ship will generate 5.3-6.4 million dollars for the State Government from recycled steel revenue.

“The saga of the Blue Lady ends as a case of two global criminals working hand in hand to profit from poisoning the poor,” said Jim Puckett of the Basel Action Network a global waste trade watchdog and spokesperson for the NGO platform. *“First there’s Star Cruises that would rather poison workers in India than spend any money on asbestos and PCB abatement prior to export, and they are aided and abetted by Indian politicians, who have sold the health of their poorest constituents to the powerful Gujarat steel lobby.”*

The decision to beach the Blue Lady was granted reportedly on 01 August 2006 following a cursory inspection by a Technical Committee team which was staffed by Ministry of Environment, Central Pollution Control Board, and Gujarat Maritime Board officials. The inspection team admitted the presence of PCBs and asbestos, but failed to quantify them or to identify where they are located on the ship. They further failed to address the question of whether the Alang yards had the technical capacity to manage such dangerous materials and protect their workers. Yet the conclusion of the Committee [2] was that Alang could handle all hazards found on board. The NGO Global Platform published a critique [3] of this technical committee report last week citing fatal flaws and lack of compliance with international law, but it was ignored along with the October 2003 Supreme Court order in a rush to beach the ship. The Blue Lady is the largest ship arriving for breaking in the Alang shipyards since the French aircraft carrier Clemenceau was recalled from India by France following global furore over the legality of the export.

“It is ironic that the French government realised at the last minute that the dumping of the asbestos-laden Clemenceau on India was wrong and illegal - and our own government, whose job is to protect Indians, utterly fails to do its job,” said Gopal Krishna of Ban Asbestos Network India. *“Despite this temporary setback, the corrupt global shipping industry and governments that allow it's illegal and immoral behaviour are increasingly seen as bearing the guilt of those hundreds of deaths in Alang and elsewhere were they send their trash to be disposed of out of sight and out of mind.”*

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[1] Open Letter to Star Cruises found at: http://www.ban.org/Library/060721_demand_letter.html

[2] TC report found at:

<http://www.ban.org/Library/SS%20blue%20lady%20inspection%20report%20by%20tech%20committ%20India.doc>

[3] Found at:

http://www.ban.org/Library/NGO_Platform_Critique_on_TC_Inspection_Report_Final.pdf