

Explosion kills at least 4 workers on a shipbreaking yard in Bangladesh

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An explosion has killed at least 4 workers and injured many others at the Mak Corporation shipbreaking yard in Chittagong, Bangladesh, reports the NGO Shipbreaking Platform, a global coalition of environmental, human and labour rights non-governmental organisations working for safe and clean ship recycling. This tragedy took place on a ship being broken in violation of a Bangladesh High Court order that allowed only decontaminated ships to be broken on the beaches of Bangladesh. This High Court decision was ruled in March 2009, and again in August 2010, after a long successful legal battle was lead by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), a member of the Shipbreaking Platform. Today the Bangladeshi court has issued a suo moto rule, a rule of its own initiative, directing the government to stop the breaking of ships in the country until further order. It also issued a contempt of court ruling against the owner of the shipbreaking yard. The explosion took place at the Mak Corporation Shipbreaking yard on the MT Pranam ship (IMO number: 8321383) on Tuesday, January 18th, 2011 at 10: 30 am and could be heard from over three kilometres away. It took the fire-fighters over two hours to extinguish the fire caused by the explosion. Four workers died from burn injuries and have been identified as Miraj, 18, Rubel, 25, Liton, 35 and Jubayer, 22, and many others were injured. Some of the surrounding buildings in the two-kilometre radius of the explosion have suffered damage, cracks can be observed along their sides. Though the owner of the yard, Abul Kashem, also vice-president of the Bangladesh Shipbreaker's Association, claims that no shipbreaking was taking place at the time of the accident, workers and witnesses claim that about 30 workers were breaking the ship at the time of the explosion. An anonymous worker says that the explosion occurred when the workers were in the process of dismantling the ship's fuel tank. Combustion occurred when the left over fuel that had not been completely cleaned out of the ship came into contact with the blowtorch being used to cut it. « For the moment there have been four bodies found, but according to what the workers have told me, many other bodies may have been thrown into the sea last night », says Muhammed Ali Shahin, the NGO Shipbreaking Platform coordinator in Bangladesh who has been following the events closely in Chittagong, « An investigation is necessary to find the exact cause of the explosion and the casualties it has caused. Often bodies are hidden by the shipbreaking yard owners to camouflage the extent of the human loss and environmental damage the accidents cause on their yards in order not to hurt business. » In addition to the above mentioned suo moto rules issued today by the court against the government and the Mak Corporation Shipbreaking yard, it also ordered the chairman of Chittagong port authority to form a committee of three expert officials within the next seven days to investigate the reasons behind the fatal accident. By giving this shipbreaking yard environmental clearance in October to keep on breaking ships, the Ministry of Environment has violated a High Court order which ruled that ships are not allowed to enter Bangladeshi territory without being pre-cleaned in the country of origin and shipbreaking yards without necessary infrastructure and worker security measures installed cannot legally practice shipbreaking. This was a landmark ruling for environmentalists that was achieved by the hard work of BELA and the NGO Shipbreaking Platform. Last year, in Bangladesh alone, 28 workers died on the shipbreaking yards and many others were injured. These figures do not count those who have died from the long-term effects of the working conditions in this industry (i.e. lung cancer).” If the international political will continues to allow and support shipbreaking on the tidal beaches of Bangladesh, deaths and terrible accidents will continue to occur and be part of this business, whilst taking a heavy toll on the Bangladeshi people and the environment. These shipbreaking activities could and should be carried out in an environmentally sound and safe way, off the beaches of South Asia” says Grazia Cioci, Acting Director of the NGO Shipbreaking Platform.