

# Steel Beach

## Shipbreaking in Bangladesh

Our latest photographic exhibition portrays an industry that's a danger to both its workers and the environment. Guest photographer **Andrew Bell** relates the impressions he gathered while working on this striking portfolio.

AT LOW TIDE, the vast mud flat of the Bay of Bengal is almost apocalyptic. Unwanted oil tankers, passenger liners and fishing boats dot the world's largest river delta like beached leviathans, the monolithic steel forms turning coastal idyll into industrial wasteland. Around 40,000 workers toil with blowtorches, hammers and brute strength on the steel carcasses, recycling everything on the ship as well as the ship itself. This rather surreal industry is in Bangladesh, on a stretch of beach about 25 kilometres long near the town of Sitakunda.

Bangladesh is a Sunni Muslim country that was formerly known as East

25-kilometre coastal stretch – it's big business but minimal workers' rights.

The work, needless to say, is extremely dangerous. Basic safety equipment such as hard hats, gloves, boots or goggles are in most cases unheard of and insurance is a foreign concept. Since the industry is not officially recognised by the Government, there are no policing entities to enforce codes of practice. Politicians and government employees hold financial stakes in the shipyards, further isolating workers who are pushing for change. (Bangladeshis are very engaged in politics, which can often result in 'hartels' or strikes.)

*OPPOSITE: Workers at the end of the night shift carry empty drums out to the hulks, to fill with waste oil.*

*LEFT: Yard owners inspect progress of breaking up a tanker*

*BELOW: A night watchman keeps warm by a fire of solid oil*

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Pakistan. It was created in 1947 with the partition of British India into the separate states of India and Muslim Pakistan, the latter comprising two widely separated, culturally distinct parts, East and West Pakistan. Bangladesh, the eastern portion, gained independence in 1971 after a bloody war with Pakistan.

Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world, one of the poorest and, according to the UN, one of the most corrupt. In a land where unemployment is 40% and safe working conditions are a luxury, it's little surprise that those working in these grim shipyards consider themselves lucky to be there. Eighty percent of the population live on less than two dollars a day in an underdeveloped economy where the biggest currency note in circulation equates to about 12 Australian dollars. There are approximately 65 separately owned scrap yards functioning simultaneously on the

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Explosions due to gas build-up and falling steel are among the dangers workers face, along with other chemical perils that have not been dealt with effectively. Most other countries have banned work on 'raw', untreated tankers. In India, for example, the Gujarat Pollution Control Board monitors the removal of toxic and hazardous material from foreign vessels before dismantling. Bangladesh remains one of few countries without regulation of the industry by government departments.

Approximately 600 serious accidents occur every year, around 20 resulting in death. A single explosion in 2004 killed six workers. Typically a family may

receive the equivalent of \$300 for the death of a worker but this is highly variable as the payoffs depend wholly on the sympathies of shipyard owners. Hiring labourers through contractors, the owners seem legally untouchable. Someone with a contract to deliver tons of steel from the hulk to a truck will employ labourers by the day, distancing the yard from employer responsibilities and making legal action futile.

While there have been a few critical media reports, one by the BBC in 2002 and another by Radio France, this exposure has been catalyst to minimal change. A 'model yard' was set up – it was called PHP, standing for peace,



TOP: On a rainy morning workers arrive for a 12-hour shift.

ABOVE: After a night shift on the ships.

happiness and prosperity – but the biggest change was the tightening up of security. Yard owners simply barred the gates and turned away visitors, particularly those with foreign faces and carrying cameras or recording devices.

Up until the early 1970s old or uneconomical ships might sometimes be scuttled at sea, so initially the Bangladesh scrap merchants got them for free. All they had to do was take them away. This has changed with stiff competition in the scrap trade from India, Turkey,

third of his wage is spent on food and bedding, the rest is sent home to support his family.

Breaking a sizeable ship takes about six months, until all that remains is an oily stain on the beach; the entire ship is recycled. As the ship gets lighter, large anchor winches on land haul the hulks with the tide towards the yards.

Scrap dealers and sellers are invited to tender for the components. High-value items such as lifeboats, electronics,

floods and bad luck. The daily newspapers are filled with stories of terrorist bomb attacks, extremist executions, crime, corruption and a horrific road toll. Using any sort of road transport is a nerve-wracking experience. Adhering strictly to a right-of-way rule – the bigger the vehicle, the more rights the driver commands – adds a certain electrical charge to every journey. Adding to the road toll are those drivers who have survived an accident but were cornered by angry bystanders. Accident reports often end by stating either that the driver escaped the scene, or was beaten to death by an angry mob with no faith in the legal system.

Among this chaos (to which there is a certain rhythm) many outsiders feel that

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Pakistan and China, so that a large tanker now costs millions of dollars. Ship purchases are typically financed by bank loans commanding 15% interest. A yard owner hopes to make around 10% of the purchase price, and the growing interest bill drives the yards to operate seven days a week (although many workers take off Fridays for prayers).

A larger yard employs around 700 workers, 300 of whom work a night shift when darkness compounds the risk of dangerous work conditions. Shifts start at 8 am and 8 pm, a 12-hour shift earning an average wage of about US\$2. A ‘lifter’ will earn less and a supervisor a little more. A typical example would be a boy who is around 14 years old, from the north-west of Bangladesh. He cuts steel in the shipyards 12 hours a day, seven days a week. For those from this poor rural area, the pay is far superior to existing agricultural labour opportunities. About a

furniture and kitchen fittings are keenly sought after. Passenger liner furniture is valued for its quality; there is even an industry making fake ship furniture to take advantage of this demand. Heavy mechanical equipment from the engine room, as well as pipes, portholes, switches, railings, and ladders, are all hot numbers.

Electronic utilities such as wire, light bulbs and any bolts or screws that can be undone are also salvaged. Even the oil from the bottom of sumps and bilges is removed and sold as fuel, to fire bricks. Reduced to bare metal, the hull is cut into manageable pieces and loaded into trucks. About 80% of Bangladesh’s steel needs are met from the ships. Most is melted down to make steel for the construction industry, but some is also used for truck bodies.

Bangladesh is a country that has had much more than its share of famine,

the shipbreaking industry has to be stopped, but there are many more issues apart from safety and pollution (visit [www.greenpeaceweb.org/shipbreak/bangladesh.asp](http://www.greenpeaceweb.org/shipbreak/bangladesh.asp)). Many families rely on these jobs as their only means of support and no one is offering an alternative. Perhaps if the government and yard owners followed the Indian example, a safer work environment with less pollution could turn a fringe activity into a bona fide industry the benefits of which were more widely spread. ■

The exhibition *Steel Beach – Shipbreaking in Bangladesh* is on view in the Tasman Light gallery until 30 March 2008.

ABOVE LEFT: Night shift workers cut the steel sections of a ship.

ABOVE RIGHT: Recycled toilets and sinks are sold to builders and renovators.