

There are still shipowners out there who believe that the scrapping of ships on the beaches of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan is necessary, even though the working conditions are extremely dangerous. One of the individuals trying to turn the world's attention to the issue is 45-year-old attorney Syeda Rizwana Hasan. But Europe is far away.

The shipping industry's dark conscience

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The scrapping industry is a key source of income for the country, employing as many as 250,000 people, which leads to opposition in the government in terms of tightening the export-moves for the industry.

The violent explosion on Iranian tanker T.T. Dana was caused by a pocket of gasoline and gasoline fumes, and it had fatal consequences for the people onboard the ship. Even though the ship was completely still, 16 people were killed and up to 50 people injured.

But it was not so much the scope of the accident that got the media's attention, it was more the fact that T.T. Dana was located on a sandy beach in Asia at the time of the explosion, as the aging tanker had been sailed onto the shore of Chittagong in Bangladesh on that day in 2000, when a welding iron broke through the rusty hull. Like ants on a cadaver, an army of local workers were taking the ship apart, throwing the bits and pieces into the brown waters below, from where the debris was carried away on primitive boats to be sold as scrap.

That was in 2000. And the situation is the same today, as not a lot has changed on the beaches in Bangladesh since then. The work is the same and the risk for the workers is extreme. And few people worry about their safety.

One of the people working to change these conditions, and who has been working with the issue for many years, is Syeda Rizwana Hasan. Attorney, environmental activist, and head of the organization Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), which since the 90s has been fighting the country's huge scrapping industry, having taken several cases all the way to the country's Supreme Court.

"The people working at the scrap yards are not aware of the conditions they are being subjected to by their employers. That this could end up costing them their lives, I find that very hard to accept," she tells ShippingWatch. Syeda Rizwana Hasan used to visit the yards frequently, but she has been denied access for more than a year and a half now due to her work. This does not make it any easier for the 45-year-old woman to reach her goal. And it becomes even more difficult considering that the country's prime minister is defying the verdicts of the Supreme Court, as she fears that improving working conditions at the yards

would shut down the scrapping industry. In light of this, Syeda Rizwana Hasan is calling for action from organizations in completely different parts of the world, including the EU in Brussels and the IMO in London.

And during the spring of 2013, the subject of responsible scrapping caused a lot of debate in Brussels. The EU Commission proposed a new set of regulations in late 2012 aimed at ensuring that European ships in the future could only be scrapped at facilities complying with standards related to the safety of workers and the environment. This happened as part of the recognition that the international scrapping convention, the Hong Kong convention, had made no real progress since it was adopted in 2009. For while adopting it is one thing, putting it into effect is a wholly different matter. The most optimistic prospect right now is 2020.

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When the ambassadors of the EU countries voted on the final proposal during the summer 2013, it was approved by the smallest possible majority and in a more amputated version than originally proposed.

The Asian shipowners admit that the conditions on the facilities are poor. But the Asian Shipowners' Association does not believe that the sector is ready for a ban against beaching, the industry's term for scrapping a ship on a beach. The shipping industry depends on this possibility, and if

they decide to shut down the facilities, there will simply be insufficient capacity for scrapping the many ships that need to be destroyed in the coming years, says the Asian shipowners'. One of the most heavily debated issues concerns how long a shipping company can be held responsible for its ships, to make sure that the ships are scrapped under decent conditions. When a shipping company has sold its ship to a middleman, who sells it on to be scrapped, is the shipowner still responsible? Brussels-based NGO Shipbreaking Forum says yes, and points to such measures as issuing certificates that commit buyers to not sending the ships to be scrapped on the beaches of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. This summer as part of efforts to put added pressure on shipowners, the NGO published a list of 1,000 shipping companies who have made good business since 2009 by selling their ships to scrap in Southeast Asia. Danish shipping company Nordana is featured on the list, as the company sold a ship to an Indian scrapping company back in 2009, knowing well where the ship would end up, CEO Lars Steen Rasmussen admitted to ShippingWatch. He did, however, stress that the company rarely needs to scrap ships and is looking forward to the implementation of the Hong Kong convention. Maersk went about the issue in a different manner and has, since the Hong Kong convention was adopted, had a policy of not beaching ships, opting instead to rely only on specially approved facilities in China, even though the shipping company says it loses one million dollars per 4,000 teu container ship, as the scrap price is higher on the beaches. The world's 8th largest container carrier, APL, took advantage of this in the summer of 2013, when four of the carrier's ships, from its so-called President series where all the ships are named for US presidents, were sold to scrap at one of the beaches mentioned, namely Alang in India. And the same argument is generally repeated whenever the critique surfaces: International regulation is the best solution, and thus many carriers are waiting for the Hong Kong convention. At this point, Norway is the only country to have ratified the Hong Kong convention. ▶



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And that is too long to wait, says Syeda Rizwana Hasan. In addition to the fact that the ships are dangerous for the workers, a majority of them have not yet been drained for toxic waste.

"The international and national authorities ought to ensure that the ships do not enter Bangladesh carrying toxic waste onboard. It has to be removed outside of the country, because we do not have the necessary facilities to handle it," she says, referring to the Basel convention on waste, which requires that shipowners drain the ships.

The World Bank estimates that 79,000 tons of asbestos and 250,000 tons of dangerous chemicals will be dumped on the beaches of Bangladesh during the next 20 years alone.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan is working to stop this development, and four years ago she actually succeeded in getting the Supreme Court to ban all shipyards failing to comply with special environmental standards. But following pressure from the industry, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina opted to ease the regulation. Besides, the industry is a key source of income for the country, employing as many as 200,000 people, which leads to opposition in the government in terms of enforcing the various laws the Supreme Court has placed on the industry over the years. Syeda Rizwana Hasan has taken around seven cases to court so far, launching a new case in October 2013. "The industry is never going to change if we don't push it. The pressure only comes when the government begins to show some commitment in this. So far the rules aren't very tight, and we want to change that. The problem already has the court's word, now we have to keep pushing. And we'll keep pushing until we get what we want," she says. ●

Facts

70-80 percent of the global fleet ends its days in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India under highly criticized conditions.

The Hong Kong convention is the IMO's proposal aimed at introducing a global set of rules for the responsible scrapping of ships. But very few countries have ratified the convention. The most optimistic prospect is that the convention comes into effect by 2020.

During the last three years, 519 ships have been scrapped in Bangladesh, and 70 ships are currently being taken apart on the country's beaches.

Before the summer of 2013, the EU voted to compile a list of approved scrapping facilities within the EU and in non-OECD countries. The requirements for the scrapping facilities are estimated to come into effect in five years.



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