

CEMETERY OF HELL

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In Bangladesh, along the Bay of Bengal, the work yards for ship breaking found in Chittagong are the number one world producers of recycled steel, with more than one million tons of metal treated in 2006. The cheap cost of manual labor, one of the lowest on the planet, largely explains this high production. Here, on the beaches of Sitakundu, in the largest ship cemetery of the world, deadly explosions are frequent, and work conditions are extreme. For the young workers, this cemetery for ships is the cemetery of hell.....

Depending on the size of the ship, it takes up to 500 workers over three to six months to demolish it. The steel extracted is negotiated for resale at a price of \$450 US per ton with a margin of 15%. Steel is not the only material resold. All mechanical and electrical system, cables of all kinds, inox kitchen appliances, wood, machinery, plastic, assorted accessories such as life buoys and life boats are resold. The recycled goods can be found laid out in an open market under blue skies in Sitakunda, a suburb of Chittagong on the way to Dacca.

Closed to the curious, the only access to the shipyard is a gate controlled by the guards and all workers leaving the site are thoroughly searched. Here, I discover an immense waste of strewn iron that from afar looks like, in the reflection of a wave of crude oil, several carcasses of beached, broken vessels. Further down, dozens of stock barrels are stacked on the "sand". Many are busted, allowing a black, sticky substance to leak out.

Most of the workers are young. Many are teenagers because the work is so exhausting. Under a burning sun, for a euro a day, their job consists of taking apart blocks of steel, separating, breaking and sectioning steel or transporting gas tanks for the torch blowers who cut the boat. A group of eight young persons load a vendor's truck who will resell his merchandise in Pakistan. The foreman who runs the operations protects himself from the cruel sun that burns temperatures as high as 45 degrees Celsius. To build moral, the workers chant in chorus, as if slaves from another era, to help themselves transport the heavy sheets of steel lined with ragged edges on their frail shoulders. Almost all have no gloves to protect themselves from cuts. Some wear sandals. Others are barefoot walking over various debris sharp as razor blades. Injuries are high. A bitter odor permeates from all sorts of chemical products that burn the throat and lungs. These ships, not treated beforehand for its pollution, spit out dangerous substances such as PCB (polychlorobiphenyles), asbestos, lead paint, and heavy metals such as cadmium and arsenic and sometimes even radioactive material.

From the view of the camera's lens, the young start laughing as if to forget their allotted fate, then just as quickly, they return to their look of the living dead. Their faces drip in sweat. When I offer one of them a cigarette, the boss becomes furious, shouting, "No good! No good!" and makes me understand that smoking is not good for the workers.

Suddenly, a violent explosion resounds about three hundred meters from me. By the time I attach the telephoto lens, I film flames and a thick black smoke escaping from a gaping hole in the flank of the hull. These are rare images which capture the tragic phenomena that occur regularly on the beaches of Chittagong. Pockets of gas vapors can form in certain compartments in the hull of the ships, and the slightest spark can provoke a terrible explosion. The worker holding the torch is instantly pulverized by the blast. I've just witnessed it. Everyone continues his work, as if nothing has happened. Later, I ask if there are any victims and I'm told, "Maybe two or three. We don't know."

Fatalists, the torch blowers work from birth to death. One of those is Mustafa, 30 years old, who is equipped with a helmet for his "security". Mustafa's "salary of fear" is double that of the ordinary worker - two euros a day. "I have to work to feed my family. I have no choice. To have a job is something," he explains.

Statistics are difficult to obtain. According to a report by Greenpeace and the International Federation for Human Rights that has been reported in the local media, several hundred persons have died in Chittagong over the last few years. Others are handicapped for life from accidents such as the explosion or by traumas endured from steel sheets and objects falling on the victims.

Later, in the enclosure of the shipyard, the workers return to a site – a rather, unhealthy empty premise littered with rusted debris and garbage. This is where they rest without water or electricity. Always breathing air filled with the smell of tar. It's an essential break for Sitalpur, 18 years old, and Nabi, 20 years old. The two single men own a plank for a bed and a string to hang clothes. Tomorrow morning, they return to work. And so it goes every day, life in the ship cemetery of Chittagong - a garbage dump for rich countries, notably European, whose eyes are closed to the disastrous ecological and social conditions of one of the poorest countries in the world.

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<http://greenpeaceweb.org/shipbreak/whatis.asp>