

One in six Alang ship workers has asbestosis: govt report

[Despite a new report confirming the high incidence of asbestos poisoning among Alang's ship workers, the Alang Ship Breaking Association stands by its rejection of claims that its workers are at risk](#)

Almost one in six ship workers at Asia's largest shipbreaking yard, Alang in Gujarat, suffers from asbestos poisoning that could lead to lung cancer. And at 2 per 1,000, the fatal accident rate among Alang's ship workers is several times higher than the 0.34 per 1,000 in the mining industry, considered India's most unsafe profession. These facts, revealed in a new report, are the first official confirmation of Alang's longstanding notoriety as a hazardous and unsafe place to work.

The report by a Supreme Court-appointed panel calls for sweeping reforms in working conditions at the shipyard, a 12 km stretch along the Gujarat coastline.

The 200-page report by a two-member committee headed by the secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) Pradipto Ghosh says that 16% of workers in Alang may have asbestosis. The ailment is a chronic inflammatory condition of lung tissue caused by prolonged exposure to large amounts of asbestos. It could lead to lung cancer.

"In ships brought for breaking, free asbestos is usually present as thermal insulation in boilers and floor tiles. When this asbestos is removed, its particles become airborne and attack the lungs," says the report. It normally takes more than 10 years for full-blown asbestosis to develop, but its onset is hastened by higher levels of exposure, the report adds.

The committee was set up in February 2006 while the Supreme Court was hearing the controversial *Le Clemenceau* case. Under sustained pressure from environmental groups, the court ordered the MoEF to form a committee of experts to determine whether allegations of asbestos poisoning among Alang's ship workers were true. In August the Supreme Court ruled that the report be published before it decided whether the decommissioned French cruiseliner, *Blue Lady*, could be broken at Alang.

The committee, in turn, commissioned the Gujarat-based National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH) to carry out the study. The report says 15 of the 94 workers tested showed early signs of asbestosis. The committee recommended that workers showing radiological abnormalities suggesting asbestosis should be submitted to high resolution computerised tomography, a better diagnostic tool than chest radiography for asbestosis.

NIOH director Dr H N Sayed said: "We carried out x-rays on 94 workers and our medical examination has revealed that 15 of them could be suffering from very early stages of asbestos poisoning. We have prescribed more tests to confirm their status."

Noting that exposure to all kinds of asbestos could lead to cancer of the lung and pleura (mesothelioma), the report says: "Workers with radiological changes suggestive of asbestosis are at higher risk than workers with normal chest x-rays."

Dr Sayed said it normally takes 10 years for full-blown asbestosis to develop. "The first symptom is shortness of breath. But once a worker suffers from shortness of breath, he can no longer find employment because the job at the yard is very arduous -- it involves climbing up and lifting heavy material."

According to Dr Sayed, the workers they tested are still “healthy workers and that’s why they are working”.

The report also suggests various measures to improve workers’ conditions and check disease and the high accident rate among workers. It says that the Supreme Court directives in 1995 for asbestos-exposed workers should be followed, and all “stakeholders” including medical professionals need awareness and training on health issues related to asbestos exposure.

Besides these recommendations on improving workers’ health, the committee’s seven-step clean-up programme for Alang also includes:

- A procedure to assess hazardous waste and its verification before a ship beaches.
- Detailed guidelines on anchoring, beaching and breaking.
- Mandatory dismantling and recycling facility management plan for all ships.
- Landfills to deal with hazardous waste like oil and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls).
- Monitoring of air, sea and sediment quality.
- An industry review committee to monitor progress.

The report, submitted to the court recently, is the first official confirmation that asbestos harms workers at Alang, a charge often made by environmentalists who have long argued that ships brought for dismantling contain large amounts of hazardous waste that Alang’s workers are ill-equipped to handle.

These findings support a report by the international environmental group Greenpeace in December 2005 that said that thousands of workers in countries like India, Pakistan and China had probably died over the past 20 years in accidents or exposure to toxic waste. The Gujarat Maritime Board (GMB) that oversees the running of Alang has told Greenpeace that 372 workers had died there since the ship-breaking industry was first developed in 1982. But Greenpeace and the International Federation of Human Rights say, based on worker interviews, that the number could be as high as 50-60 deaths a year.

Meanwhile the Alang Ship Breaking Association, which that has in the past rejected charges of asbestos poisoning, continues to deny the presence of asbestosis among its workers. President of the association, Raj Bansal, said he hadn’t seen this latest report but dismissed its findings. “All I can say is that it is not possible at all. We provide safety equipment and take all necessary measures for the safety of the workers.”

Source: *Hindustan Times*, September 8, 2006
The Indian Express, September 8, 2006
International Herald Tribune, September 8, 2006
www.bbnews.com, September 7, 2006
Reuters, September 7, 2006