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5 Gateway Center, 6th Fl, Pittsburgh, PA 15222 • www.nlcnet.org • tel: 412.562.2406 • fax: 412.562.2411

Eight More Workers Burned to Death In Bangladesh Shipbreaking Yard

By Charles Kernaghan

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Agate / IMO: 8413461

On Saturday, December 26, 2009, workers at the **Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking** yard were ordered to begin cutting apart the main gas tank on the **Agate** (IMO 8413461), an enormous oil tanker they had been breaking apart for the last month. Workers say the gas tank at the bottom of the ship was huge, about 40 feet long. Management also instructed the workers to begin cutting apart a nearby oil waste tank. Management assured the workers that the tanks were clean, meaning they were free of dangerous gas, gas vapors and oil residue.

Approximately 50 workers were on board the ship, mostly “cutters”—workers who use blow torches to cut the metal into pieces—and their young helpers.

One of the workers who was injured, Mr. Noor Alam, told us that between 15 and 18 workers climbed on top of the tanks and began using their blow torches to cut through the metal.

The workers had been lied to. The gas and oil tanks had not been cleaned. Around 10 a.m., cutters working near the middle of the gas tank broke through the metal, and sparks from their torches showered down into the tank. There was a huge explosion that could be heard for miles, engulfing the workers in flames, which shot for 50 feet above the ship. They were trapped in an inferno. The fire was so intense it burned out of control for seven or eight hours.



Nurul Islam Mintu, 35 years old.—died of burns, December 30, 2009



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Seven workers were burned to death, and an eighth worker is still missing and presumed dead. At least a dozen were injured, many seriously burned.

**Seven Workers Killed,
One Missing and presumed dead**

Four workers were killed immediately in the explosion:

- 1.) Mr. M. Salim Reza, 25 years old
- 2.) Mr. Rana Babu, 22 years old
- 3.) Mr. Rabiul Mondol, 22 years old
- 4.) Mr. Shohorab, 35 years old

- 5.) Mr. Rais Uddin, 55 years old (*Died later than same day*)

- 6.) Mr. Nurul Mintu, 35 years old (*Died Wednesday, December 30 at 8:00 p.m. Suffered severe burns on his face, eyes and chest.*)

- 7.) Mr. Abu Raihar, 22 years old (*Died Thursday, December 31 at 7:15 p.m. Suffered burns over 80 percent of his body.*)

- 8.) Mr. Abul Kalam (*Missing since the explosion and presumed dead.*)

* At least a dozen workers were injured, many of them seriously burned.

One of the injured workers, Mr. Noor Alam, an experienced cutter who had worked at the Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking yard for seven years, told us the following.

“We were cutting the ship for one month. It was in the lower part of the ship. We had no idea that flammable gas and oil were still inside the tanks. We thought the tanks had been cleaned.

“It was the main gas tank in the ship. Its size was huge. I was to cut one side of the tank. Other workers also started cutting the tank. After some time the tank exploded with a tremendous bang and the tank burst into flames. I was knocked out and don’t know what happened afterward. When I came to, I was in the hospital. You can see my face is burned.

“Allah has saved me from death. I will never work in a shipbreaking yard again.”

Another group of Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking yard workers told us:

“We saw it from the shipyard. It was around 10 a.m. The cutter men were cutting the gas and oil tanks. A fire broke out near the gas tank causing a massive explosion. The ship was engulfed in flames in no time. The fire burned so strongly that it could be seen from a great distance away. Everyone was terrified. We saw the fire and the workers were jumping from the ship. Some workers who had relatives or friends on the ship ran to try to save those injured.

“We are terrified now, because workers died in front of us. It is very frightening.

“Many workers have gone back to their homes, as work is now stopped. The relatives of the dead workers have their dead bodies. [The yard was closed for a few days and is now back in full operation.]



Mr. Noor Alam, burn victim



Lutfar, burn victim



Lutfur Rahman, burn victim

No ambulances arrived to take the dead and injured workers to the hospital. Rather, two company vans were used to transport the most seriously burned workers. It took over an hour for the workers to arrive at the hospital. The lack of ambulances and immediate medical care may have contributed to an increased loss of life.

The injured workers were taken to the Chittagong Medical College Hospital and to the Sitakunda Health Complex. Only after three days were the most critically burned workers transferred to the burn unit of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, which is where Mr. Nurul Mintu and Mr. Abu Raihar died.

The workers heard that management had given the dead workers' families 10,000 taka (\$145) and that after the death certificates are signed the families may receive some further compensation from the company.



Sadam Hossain



Sadam –22 year-old burn victim

Labor Laws Grossly Violated in Broad Daylight

At the Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking yard, the approximately 350 workers were paid just **22 to 32 ½ cents an hour** and **\$2.62 to \$3.63 a day**, working 11 to 12 hour shifts, doing one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. Many workers report working 30 days a month.

“We work 30 days a month,” one worker said. *“We aren’t millionaires. We have to pay house rent, to spend money purchasing food, to send money home to our families...”* It is only when workers are sick, injured or exhausted that they will take three to four days off a month.

The workers have no work contracts, are paid no overtime premium, have no health or safety protections, no medical care and no holidays. The shipbreaking workers have no rights whatsoever.

Three to four workers share each primitive dorm room.

Some of the workers are just 14 or 15 years old.

“If workers are injured with some accidents during work, the owner doesn’t provide medical treatment. The other workers contribute together to pay for medical treatment of the injured worker. But the owner should have provided this for his workers.” [Management only provides minimum care when workers are killed or critically burned in explosions or when workers are crushed by falling metal sheets.]

“This company doesn’t supply anything. They give only gloves, and then shout, ‘how do your gloves tear so soon?’ On the other hand, our shirts are burned up and we have to buy other shirts. The company doesn’t give helmets or boots. I myself purchased a pair of boots that cost 600 taka.” [600 taka = \$8.72, the equivalent of three days’ wages. The workers are not provided welder’s vests so they must wear two shirts in hopes that the sparks will not burn through to their skin.]

The workers at the Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking yard have no hope that there will be any improvements. Workers will continue to be abused, cheated, injured and killed.



Nazrul, burn victim

Criminal Neglect

The owner of the **Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking Yard** is a very powerful and wealthy business man, Mr. **Haji Abdur Rahim**. The Rahim Group controls six companies and describes its group as the *“largest modern industrial steel complex in the country.”* It was one of Mr. Haji Abdur Rahim’s companies, the **Diamond Steel Products Co (Pvt.) Limited** that purchased the **Agate** oil tanker from its owner **Bestrank** for scrapping to supply steel to the Rahim Group of factories. The Agate was built by Sasbo Heavy Industries in 1985 and may have initially sailed under a Japanese flag. However, by October 2006, the Agate carried a Singapore flag. A company called **World Tankers Management PTE**, with the same Singapore address as Bestrank, managed the Agate.



Masud—21 year-old burn victim

The Rahim Group says that their company has received technical collaboration from **Tata Steel** of India and **Florida Steel** of the United States.

It is clear that both **Rahim Group** and the Singapore-based **Bestrank** and **World Tankers Management PTE** should share responsibility for the tragic, easily-avoidable killing of eight workers and the serious injury of over a dozen others. Bestrank and World Tankers Management PTE sold the Agate oil tanker to the Rahim Group with flammable gas, gas vapors and oil residues remaining in its tanks.

According to a *Daily Star* front page article by Pinaki Roy on January 11, 2010, the Rahim Group was warned twice—on October 10 and 19—by the Bangladeshi Government’s chief inspector of the Department of Explosives, Mr. Kahairul Bashar, that at least six tanks on the Agate were “*not free from dangerous gas vapors.*” The Department of Explosives was very clear that it was not safe for any workers to be near the tanks until they were properly cleaned and flushed out.



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It was another Bangladeshi company, JF (Bangladesh Ltd.), which is incorporated in the United Kingdom, that requested that the Department of Explosives check the Agate's tanks.

Following the explosion, the Rahim Steel and Shipbreaking yard manager, Mr. Abus Selim, claimed that the Agate's tanks had been cleared before the dismantling of the Agate began. It seems clear, given the magnitude of the explosion, that the Agate's tanks were not cleaned, and if they were, the work was shoddy and incomplete.

On December 29, police inspector M. Azam Khan filed charges against six people connected to the explosion of the Agate, including a managing director of Rahim Steel and Shibreaking Yard, a Mr. Ishrafil Alam.

However, to date there has been no serious attempt to bring these people in for questioning.

More hopeful are two recent breakthroughs. On November 9, 2009, the high court of Bangladesh's Supreme Court ordered the government to take steps to guarantee that the country's labor code will be enforced in the shipbreaking yards. As things stand now, the shipbreaking workers have zero rights.

Then on January 2, 2010, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, emotionally moved by the needless loss of life on the Agate, announced that her government will finally formulate a policy to regulate the shipbreaking industry.

However, labor leaders and knowledgeable labor rights activists in Bangladesh feel it will still be many years—if ever—before the powerful shipbreaking yard owners are held accountable under Bangladesh Labor Law. The only certainty, without labor law enforcement, is that Bangladesh's shipbreaking workers will continue to be maimed, killed, denied their basic legal rights and cheated of their wages for many years to come.

International solidarity is desperately needed.

In 2009, 36 shipbreaking workers were needlessly killed due to the criminal absence of even the most rudimentary health and safety standards and labor law enforcement. This means that on average a shipyard worker is killed every other week. (The 25 deaths in 2009 include one workers who is still missing and presumed dead.)



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Links:

“Where Ships and Workers Go to Die”, National Labor Committee, September 2009:

<http://www.nlcnet.org/article.php?id=672>

Update: Shipyard Murder, September 22, 2009:

<http://www.nlcnet.org/article.php?id=672#update--sept%2022>