Heavy burden: Ill-protected workers break ships at Alang, where smoke and dust obscure the sun, and crashing steel and rasping torches drown other sound. (photo by Perry Thorsvik : Sun Staff)

India: On a fetid beach, 35,000 men scrap the world's ships with little more than their bare hands. Despite wretched conditions, they say it is better to work and die than to starve and die.

--Third in a series

ALANG, India -- This is where the world dumps its ships, worn out and ready to be torn apart.
To the left and right, ships lie stranded along six miles of beach, in a hundred stages of demolition. Tankers, freighters, fish processors and destroyers -- smashed, cut, rusting, smoking -- are packed close together. This is the end of the line.
Thirty-five thousand men have come to this once-deserted stretch on the Arabian Sea to labor for the shipbreakers. They live in hovels built of scrap, with no showers, toilets or latrines. They have come from poor villages on the other side of India, lured by wages that start at $1.50 a day, to work at dangerous jobs, protected only by their scarves and sandals.

They suffer broken ankles, severed fingers, smashed skulls, malarial fevers, cholera, dysentery and tuberculosis. Some are burned and some are drowned. Nobody keeps track of how many die here from accidents and disease. Some say a worker dies every day.

"There is a shadow of death on this place," says Ram Lalit, a 22-year-old worker. "This place is haunted by death. But it is better to work and die than starve and die."

The U.S. Navy, which for years has insisted on scrapping its ships in the United States, now wants to send them abroad -- here to India, or to similar beachfronts in Pakistan or Bangladesh.

With its American scrapping program entangled in environmental and worker safety problems, criminal charges, bankruptcies and lawsuits, the Navy has decided to drop its old policy. To escape the turmoil in its domestic program, it could simply export its obsolete ships, laden with asbestos, PCBs, lead, toxic sludge and other hazards to South Asia.

The plan required the Navy to obtain an exemption from rules prohibiting the export of certain hazardous materials. The federal Maritime Administration, which owns a fleet of old cargo ships, tankers and other vessels, received a similar exemption.

With about 170 ships designated for scrapping, the Navy and Maritime Administration point to the higher prices the vessels can fetch abroad. But selling the ships overseas could put the U.S. government in the center of a growing debate over exploitation of Third World workers -- those who make the sneakers, clothes and toys to satisfy Western tastes, and receive the used car batteries, plastic bags and toxic chemicals that the West discards.

If they are sent to Alang, the U.S. government ships will join American merchant vessels that already come here. They will add to the long ranks of broken hulks -- from Norway, Japan, Greece, Russia -- that meet their end on the 190 plots here, where smoke and dust obscure the sun, and the crash of steel and the guttural rasp of the torches drown out any other sound.

The beached ships tower over the hundreds of workers who strip them apart, men who know they are expendable.

"All burden to the laborers and none to the owners," says Shive Cheren Bharti, 36, who has worked at Alang for 14 years. "There's no risk to them. If 20 people were to die at once, the owners wouldn't care."

Then, his face inexplicably lighting up in a big grin, he says, "We're the hopeless people of India."

High tides, low beach

Alang exists because of the tide. It is one of those places -- like the Bay of Fundy in Canada -- where a host of geographical circumstances come together to create exceptionally large differences between the twice-daily high and low tides. Coupled with a soft, shelving beach, the tides at Alang make shipbreaking possible with a minimum of construction. There are no piers or drydocks. Ships are simply run onto the shore.

Giant merchant vessels powered by thunderous engines and navigated by satellite signals carry the goods and fuel that enable the modern technological world to exist.

Yet a ship ends its life at the hands of several hundred practically barefoot men, and the beginning of that process depends on the phase of the moon.
Morning ritual: A worker washes outside his shack, using only a bucket. Sanitation is poor in a colony without running water or latrines. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

Twice a month, at the full moon and new moon, high tides are at their highest, and this is when a ship, be it 3,000 tons or 50,000 tons, can be driven the farthest onto the beach. And, just as a ship is launched with a bottle of champagne smashed across its bow, the dismantling begins with workers on the beach hacking open a coconut and offering a prayer for protection to the elephant god, Lord Ganesh.

But prayers aren't always enough.

On Jan. 8, the men at Plot 37 were cutting up a Greek freighter called the Vakis-T. Eight workers were cutting in a section at deck level.

"I was two feet away," says Shiv Shankar, 38. "I was talking to them. The last thing I said was, 'Why don't you work faster? It's time to get this job over with.'" The whole section broke off and plunged 40 feet into the ship's hold. Three men died from head injuries. Five survived. None was wearing a hard hat. "This was God's will," says a supervisor, Toofani Bhai, 32. "Nothing could be done about it. I felt hurt -- it pained me. I was among those who picked up the bodies and put them on the ambulance."

"It was their call to death," says Shankar, with a shrug. But not everyone here is so accepting of fate.

Heave: A gang of workers strains to lift a steel plate onto a truck at Annapurna Shipbreakers in Alang. Indian shipbreakers are reaping a bonanza as the world's major tanker lines replace their fleets. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

"The joint that broke was almost rusted through," says a worker, Sita Ram. "The shipbreaker should have known it was weak. But the shipbreakers have no regard for life."

"Alang," he says, "is a colony of the dead -- breathing, walking dead men." After the section fell, the owner of the yard called for Alang's single ambulance. It happened to be available. Digvijay H. Sarviya, the driver, says that when he got to the accident scene it appeared that two men were dead and one was near death. He decided to load all three into the ambulance, because he wasn't sure.

"Giving first aid would consume too much time," he says. "I just rush them to the hospital."

Sarviya says he makes the 40-mile trip to the hospital in Bhavnagar once a day, sometimes twice. The drive, on a two-lane road clogged by trucks, scooters, tractors and cows, takes 90 minutes to two hours. When Sarviya reached the hospital, all three of his passengers were dead.

The Vakis-T accident was hardly the most serious at Alang.

"I've seen many worse accidents," says Bhai, the supervisor. "I've seen 15 men killed."

This year, a fire reportedly killed 18 men, and at least eight died in separate blazes. In the summer of 1995, up to 12 workers -- accounts vary -- were asphyxiated by ammonia on a Russian fish-processing ship. In 1988, a fire aboard a cargo vessel killed as many as 40 men.

Recently, the Red Cross opened a clinic at Alang, but doctors and nurses don't like to come here, so it is rarely open. Most injured workers are taken to the government hospital in Bhavnagar, but a handful of owners send injured workers to Dr. Dinkar Dholakia's orthopedic clinic there instead.

They are housed together in a basement room, where daylight hardly penetrates the small dirty windows. But everyone considers this better than the hospital.

Where the money is: While everything aboard ships is scavenged, the money is in the metal. And the secret to making it is to break a ship and sell the steel quickly. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

Dr. Mukesh Shah says about 10 new patients arrive each month at the clinic. Many have anemia because of poor nutrition, and skin problems such as scabies because of poor hygiene and no laundering. Poor sanitation contributes to gastroenteritis. Many suffer from tuberculosis and alcoholism. About 40 percent of the patients have malaria, he says.

One patient, Vijay Shahu, 34, of Orissa, had been injured at Plot 88 when a steel plate crush his right leg. He was in shock when he arrived and the doctors couldn't find a pulse. He will not be able to work at the yards anymore.

Ramesh Prajpati, 22, of Uttar Pradesh, was admitted without a detectable pulse when a pipe fell from a crane and hit him in the head. His future? "Let us all hope for the best," Dholakia says.

Life in Alang
At this hour, the chief activity is along the strip of shacks that serve the workers' needs: a barber's stall and a tailor's, a man who does laundry and a Muslim prayer leader, vendors who sell bicycle parts, kerosene lamps, sodas, cigarettes, fruit and eggs.

A small Hindu temple stands outside the gate to Plot 18. The temple is shaded by a neem tree, with two bells salvaged from ships hanging from a branch. It is one small reminder of a world, a life, that exists beyond the yards.

The men live in shacks they have built out of lumber harvested from the ships. The shacks are packed on the dunes behind the beach, separated by muddy alleys. Four or eight or 12 men might live in one shack. There is no furniture, no light, no water.

Sriram Prasad, 32, with dark hair brushed forward and a bushy mustache, counts himself among the lucky men of Alang. He lives in an 8-foot-square shack with three others. They sleep on a table. The walls are covered with newspapers; little triangles of colored paper hang from the ceiling. He has a wife and two sons back home. A brother and many of his neighbors work here. He gets the shack for free.

He says he has worked here 10 years. "It's hazardous -- we're always scared of getting hurt. I get bruised all the time, but I've been lucky and never seriously hurt."

"But I've seen so many people die. I've seen 100 people die before my eyes. It is just a matter of destiny."

This attitude infects seemingly everyone in Alang. Destiny brings men who otherwise could not support themselves to this fiery corner of India. Destiny wears them out and fills them with malaria. Destiny deprives them of decent sanitation. Destiny burns them and crushes them.

"The best thing is the money, which I wouldn't get anywhere else," says Prasad, "and the worst thing is not knowing how long you'll be alive."

A single, heaving rutted road runs parallel to the beach. In the morning light, cows amble along looking for scraps of food. The trucks come to life; soon they'll be jostling for room and, later, the owners' Japanese four-wheel-drives will come blaring and darting among them.

The workday begins, no different from the day before or the day after. A cutter takes a torch to an engine room pipe, and residual oil inside bursts into flame. Nearby, smoke rolls from a smothered fire, mixing with the acrid fumes of burning steel and paint. A little farther off, a ship's deckhouse is pushed off its perch and plunges 70 feet to the hold below, with a crash that sends a huge dust cloud swirling.

Pairs of workers carry oxygen canisters on their shoulders, cushioning the load with their all-purpose safas, traditional Indian scarves. Gangs of a dozen or more men, plastic sandals on their feet, chant in unison and hoist heavy plates of steel onto their shoulders. Others heft cutting supplies alongside the beached ships, wading through muddy sand saturated with oil, dust, sludge and human excrement.

The scrapyard owners look on from their porches, sipping sweet milky tea. Walking to or from the yards, the men of Alang seem listless, worn out, beaten down. But they are diligent workers. At Plot 66, two men, facing each other, pull on the ends of a large hacksaw, like lumberjacks, cutting the copper pipes of a boiler. They've been at it since 3 p.m. the day before. They expect to finish toward sundown the next day.

Back and forth, in a patient trance, with an unvarying stroke, they pull at the saw.

"It's how we earn our bread," says Ram Sanwarey, 38.

Sought-after ships
The most sought-after ships are those that fly the American flag. Greek tankers and Russian trawlers are the bread and butter of the scrapyards here, but a shipbroker knows that a U.S. merchant vessel was built with high-grade steel, was well-maintained, and will be clean of grease and sludge when it arrives. It will be laden with asbestos and PCBs, but Indian shipbreakers do not worry about environmental damage or exposing their workers to hazardous substances. And, anyway, almost all the world's ships (except the newest) were built with asbestos and PCBs.

An American tanker called the Keystone Rhode Island arrived at Alang this year after three decades hauling oil. Owned by a shipping firm in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., the Rhode Island was sold through a New York broker to a middleman in Singapore, who sold it to a breaker here. It was one of several hundred ships that make their way to Alang every year through brokers in London and New York. In 1996, the brokers sold 464 ships for scrap, with 289 coming to India and most of the rest to Pakistan or Bangladesh. There are no reliable figures on the number of warships and commercial vessels -- mostly Russian -- sold outside the established brokerage system.

The Rhode Island was built in Baltimore by Bethlehem Steel for the Texaco Oil Co. Launched in July 1964, the 604-foot tanker represented American shipbuilding in its prime. Texaco brought in dignitaries by train for the ceremony; Beth Steel threw a lunch afterward at the Sparrows Point Country Club.

The tanker had 90,000 feet of pipe and was covered with 8,500 gallons of lead-based paint. It was powered by big steam turbines, which the Indian shipbreakers treasure because of the high-priced specialty metals that went into their construction.

Legacy of the Exxon Valdez

Its demolition is part of a much larger story.

After the Exxon Valdez ran aground in Prince William Sound in Alaska in March 1989, spilling 11 million gallons of oil, the disaster led to stronger measures to protect the environment. Congress required new tankers to have double hulls -- one inside the other -- and outlawed the use of single-hulled tankers like the Exxon Valdez by 2010.

The result has been a bonanza for Indian shipbreakers, as the world's major tanker lines replace their fleets. There are about 6,700 tankers in the world. Each tanker scrapped in India (or in Pakistan or Bangladesh) means the wholesale release of oil, sludge, asbestos, PCBs and chromates onto the beach and into the water, and the release of lead fumes into the air from burning paint. Each tanker scrapped translates into a dozen or more injuries among the workers, and an even chance that someone will be killed.

That is the last legacy of the Exxon Valdez.

With the Keystone Rhode Island, as with all ships here, the breakers begin cutting from the bow and work their way aft, leaving the bottom plates to the end. A tanker can be dismantled in about seven weeks; a warship takes considerably longer, because it is full of compartments and hard-to-cut armor plate.

Any equipment that can be reused is sold through secondhand dealers on the road from Bhavnagar. Buyers can find, in varying states of repair: sinks, toilets, chairs, mattresses, life jackets, china, telephones (with and without dials), lumber, doors, desks, fire hoses, colanders, mixers, pumps, water fountains, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, washing machines, diesel engines and surgical tables.

One dealer had an American flag, in a heap on the ground, and a selection of pianos (including a Soviet Red October upright, badly out of tune).
But items such as these account for only about 4 percent of a shipbreaker's income, said Bhavin Shah, overseer on the Keystone Rhode Island. The money is in the metal. And the secret to making it, he said, is to break the ship and sell the steel as quickly as possible.

The U.S. Navy, which could soon send dozens of ships here, has had a handful of vessels scrapped in Alang in recent years. The USS Bennington, for example, came here in 1995.

A company called Resource Recovery International paid $200,000 to scrap the World War II-era ship in the United States. Then the company agreed to pay an additional $1 million in return for being allowed to send the aircraft carrier to India. In December 1994, Resource Recovery sold the vessel to a middleman in England; the middleman then sold it to an Indian shipbreaker for a reported $6 million.

The escalating resale price is explained by the lower costs South Asian shipbreakers incur -- and the higher profits they collect -- because they pay paltry wages and aren't hindered by tough safety and environmental regulations. The Defense Department did require Resource Recovery to submit a technical plan outlining how workers' safety and health would be protected. But the plan was meaningless. Rohit Bhatt, an official with the Alang scrapyard, said his company had no contact with anyone from the U.S. government or Resource Recovery.

On a visit to the site, Sun reporters saw about 400 workers cutting steel with torches and doing other work as they dismantled the Bennington. No special precautions were taken in removing asbestos or other hazardous materials.

In fact, nowhere in Alang, among the tens of thousands of men, did anyone wear a hard hat, safety harness or respirator, even though they are required by the Gujarat Factories Rules.

Under its new policy, the Navy wouldn't need to inquire about safety practices in India. Such formalities as existed in the Bennington project, at least on paper, would be swept away.

Overseas sales of U.S. warships became possible this summer after the Environmental Protection Agency gave the Navy an exemption from rules banning the export of ships containing PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls. They were widely used in electric insulators until the 1970s, when they were linked to serious health problems.

The export agreement requires the Navy to remove the most hazardous PCBs, those in liquid form. Most others, though used in thousands of ship parts, can remain.

Asbestos and other toxic substances are not addressed in the agreement, and the Navy is not required to remove them before exporting ships. The Maritime Administration, which owns a large fleet of obsolete merchant vessels, signed a similar agreement last month.

Joan M. Bondareff, chief counsel for the maritime agency, says it is required to get the highest price possible for its ships; selling them overseas brings far more than selling them at home.

She describes the agreement as a "win-win" for the agency and the environment. "We can continue to export obsolete ships for scrapping and the environment is protected with the removal in the United States of PCBs," she says. Navy officials declined to be interviewed about overseas scrapping. But in a written statement, the Navy says the agreement "provides an opportunity for the Department of Defense to maximize the return to the U.S. Treasury from such sales."

Sen. John Glenn, an Ohio Democrat, is critical of the export plans. "While I understand the need for the Navy ... to be able to dispose of surplus craft in an expeditious and cost-effective manner, U.S. jobs and environmental problems should not be exported in the process," Glenn wrote recently to Navy Secretary John H. Dalton.

James Moorman, an environmental lawyer and former assistant U.S. attorney general, agrees.

"The Navy can manage things if they want to -- it appears they're just not interested," says Moorman. "This idea that we ship pollution problems to a Third World country strikes me as a serious mistake. It's the sort of thing our government shouldn't be doing."

Where labor is cheap

It's not surprising that the shipbreaking industry developed in India. Labor is cheap. There's a domestic market for steel. The owners are driven. The workers and their few advocates are powerless. In a Third World nation beset by corruption, poverty and overpopulation, government regulation is ineffectual.

Alang is so remote that few people other than workers or owners ever make their way here. Local officials say the industry, which started in 1983, is only now maturing. While there have been plans for several years to create a development authority to build housing, schools and a hospital, nothing has come of them. The
workers, left to fend for themselves, have nowhere to turn when disabled by illness or accident. Everywhere in Alang are men who are too hurt to work but are hanging on, hoping for a settlement from their bosses.

Sanjay Tatoba, 26, of Maharashtra, was asked one morning why he was not working. He raised his left hand. Two fingers were missing. "I feel it should not have happened, but who should I direct my anger against?" he says.

Under Indian law, men who are injured and the families of those killed are entitled to compensation from the owner. In practice, they have to prepare themselves for a long wait. Just ask Pradeep K. Thakkar, a robust lawyer who is one of the very few and very lonely advocates for the workers at Alang. Thakkar represents more than 300 Alang workers or their families before the Labor Court in Bhavnagar. It has just one judge and a backlog of 10,000 cases. Prospective clients can find Thakkar at his office on lawyers' row in Bhavnagar.

They must first climb stairs so steep that a knotted rope is provided to hang onto.

Thakkar is a forceful and unstoppable speaker. He chews betel nuts constantly, which stain his mouth red. He sits by a row of open windows, in a tiny, narrow office, spitting regularly out the window and working despite the constant din of horns, scooters, bicycle bells, cooing pigeons and slamming shutters from the street below. He keeps each case in a worn, folded manila cover, tied with faded red ribbon.

"There is no law," he shouts. "Shipbreakers are exploiting the workers. The government has no role."

A sampling of his clients' cases shows how sluggish the legal system can be. There's Shantaram Siriram Jadav, who fell into the sea while climbing an anchor chain on July 20, 1994. He was presumed drowned. For two years, his widow and four daughters were promised compensation, but got nothing. Finally, they asked Thakkar to sue, seeking $8,500, but they have not been able to raise the $17 filing fee.

There's Birbal Mahato, who was asphyxiated Sept. 17, 1993, by a gas leak. Thakkar won the case, but has been unable to collect damages of $4,500. The shipbreaker has offered to settle for less.

And there's Ram Nagina Toofani, who was burned to death on March 10, 1991. A suit filed July 22, 1991, has gone nowhere.

"Sometimes, I feel very frustrated," Thakkar says. "But I will continue my fight relentlessly."

On occasion, the state Labor Commission brings an action in criminal court when a worker dies.

"I can tell you no accident will go unpunished," says R.S. Vaghela, the labor commissioner. But not a single case, going back at least to 1989, has been resolved. No shipbreaker has ever been convicted.

The owners of the scrapyards operate with impunity. But they are a product of the system, not the creators of it. India rewards those who help themselves. "Naturally, the shipbreakers want to put labor into a better position," says H.K. Agrawal, one of the most prominent scrapyard owners in India.

Conditions are poor, he concedes. "But 15 years ago there was nothing. In my eyes, a lot has been done here. I tell you why I like this business -- I create jobs for 200 to 300 people and I run it like a family. If I do something like that, then I'm sure I'm getting some profit also."

The problems, he says, lie with the Gujarat Maritime Board. It is the responsibility of the board to worry about housing and sanitation. The shipbreakers donated about $300,000 for housing to the board, and no one knows what has become of the money. The head of the local Maritime Board office, Agrawal complains, only gets in the way.

The accidents are regrettable, he says.

"But the worker knows, 'If I die, my family gets the money,'" he says. "This is in his mind. He tends to take risks, which he should not. Most accidents occur because workers are very keen to please the owners, and they are so loyal to the owners they want to finish the work quickly. This is the good side and the bad side."

Agrawal says he once worked in the yard himself, when his father ran it. "I have seen the ups and downs of life," he says. "There was a time in my life when I did not have enough for two square meals. I feel for the downtrodden." Clad in raw silk pajamas with gold buttons, Agrawal had welcomed a group of American visitors to his home in Bhavnagar. As celebrants blew horns and set off firecrackers beyond his garden wall -- it was marriage season in Gujarat -- private security guards lingered nearby.

His contemporary home sprawls: The black-and-white marble floor of Agrawal's living room was large enough to accommodate at least eight of his laborers' shacks in Alang.

Virtually all the owners at Alang are self-made men, and they want the world to know it.

'Maharajah style'

"They like the flamboyant and a little bit of show," says Zarine Khan, a high-society Bombay interior decorator who has worked for about a dozen shipbreakers in Bhavnagar. "I'm catering to their tastes, and their tastes are pretty loud."

They like a lot of marble, she says, and paint over expensive rosewood furniture to make it showier. Khan says the shipbreakers aspire to a "maharajah style." When she completed Agrawal's house several years ago, he threw a party for himself and invited 1,000 people.

Agrawal, in his mansion, and the hundreds of men who work for him, in their shacks, are a long way from
Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat -- at least a six-hour drive over poor roads. Officials with the state labor commission there speak of conditions at Alang with certainty. They point to nine pages of detailed safety rules about shipbreaking. That the rules are unenforced was, apparently, beside the point.

But their boss, the commissioner, Vaghela, acknowledges that life and work at Alang could be better. He talks about the jobs created and steel produced by the shipbreakers. (Shipbreaking accounts for about 7 percent of India's steel production, according to the steel ministry in New Delhi.) But he also talks about the health and safety problems at Alang. There are no death certificates issued when workers die of illness or are killed, and no single government agency believes itself to be responsible for conditions there.

There is, he says, one thing that the developed countries have a moral responsibility to do: Rid their ships of hazardous materials before sending them to India.

"Your country can afford all of this," he says. "It is a small thing they can do."

Is shipbreaking a net plus or minus for India? "Don't ask these questions," Vaghela says, shaking his head. "Only developing countries are doing this job. They need money."

A hundred men, swelling to 200, move determinedly down the street, quiet at first. Then the chanting begins.

"Ram, nam, satya hai."
The Name of the Lord is the Truth.

At the front, wrapped in an orange shroud, they carry the body of Shahade Ram, 35, who had worked here five years. He had complained of a cough and chest pain. A self-styled doctor told him he would be fine and gave him a glucose injection. At 1 a.m. he had died in his hut. That was nine hours ago.

The men come to the place where Alang creek cuts through the dunes and enters the Bay of Cambray. Below the tide line, a small corral of timbers is driven into the sand. Inside it, the wood the men have been carrying is piled four feet high.

Traditionally, a body is burned with sandalwood, but here the men must use scrap lumber scavenged from the ships. There is no priest for a proper Hindu funeral, so a man who knows the ritual leads the ceremony, along with Ram's brother.

The body is placed on the pile. More boards are put on top, and large timbers are leaned against the pyre. The smell of incense overpowers the smell of excrement (here, below the high-tide mark, is where the men come to defecate) and the acrid smell of smoke from the nearby plots.

There is a brief distraction: A fire at a plot 200 yards away has sent workers running in all directions. It ends with the concussive explosion of an oxygen canister.

Seven men walk around the pyre, chanting, "Ram, nam, satya hai," and lighting the fire with burning bundles of reeds.

Bright orange flames leap from the pyre, and the men back away from the heat. A few leave. One rings a bicycle bell as he walks away.

The fire burns for a long time, until finally the tide comes in, washing away what little remains of Shahade Ram.

Sun researchers Jean L. Packard, Robert Schrott and Paul McCardell contributed to this series.

© 1997, The Baltimore Sun

Index for: Investigative Reporting 1998