Industry split over beaching method of dismantling ships

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Progress would be better made by improving standards at all ship recycling facilities. The return of Bangladeshi breaking capacity gives the industry something of a pressure valve.

OPINIONS remain divided as to whether the ship recycling industry should "get real" and accept that the beaching method of dismantling vessels on tidal shores is here to stay.

Instead of continuing with a stagnant debate about this practice, some industry experts would like to see progress made towards improving standards at ship recycling facilities across the board, rather than talking about its negative aspects.

They believe this will help the industry move forward and take greater and more speedy steps towards improving standards, which would benefit the maritime community and recycling countries as a whole.

But the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking and other anti-beaching organisations continue to argue that the method is harmful to the environment and workers at yards on the Indian subcontinent.

They argue that the alongside method, whereby vessels are berthed and dismantled in a standardised process using cranes that contain hazardous wastes so that they can be disposed of safely, is the only way for the industry.

"Can beaching be brought to the next level? I don't think so. You need emergency access for workers at all times and that cannot be done on a beach," Maersk Ship Recycling director Tom Peter Blankesten told the Tradewinds Ship Recycling Forum in Dubai.

Shipping giant Maersk recycles all its ships at "green" yards in China.

President of cash buyer GMS Anil Sharma argued, however, that any method of ship recycling could be "cherry-picked" to find faults, whether it was beaching, alongside or drydocking.

"Ship recycling is not rocket science and it can be done effectively on beaches," Dr Sharma said.

He questioned that if International Maritime Organization delegates involved with putting together regulation on ship recycling, as well as major shipowners from across the world, had visited beaching facilities on the Indian subcontinent and said it was acceptable, why then was the industry still debating about whether this method of demolition should continue.

Shyam Asotkar, professor for the Centre of Environmental Science & Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, agreed.

"It is not beaching that is the problem; it is the right practices and better management that need to come together to bring about change."

Talking to delegates from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan he said: "We are all partners in creating the problem so lets work together to help solve the problem."

"We should not be getting all the money from buying vessels for scrap, instead we should be investing some of it into improvements."

Dr Sharma made reference to Turkey, and even the US, which use the landing method, whereby ships are dropped up off a beach on to a concrete slipway, allowing contaminants to be contained.

In the past, this has been suggested by other industry experts as a feasible solution to improving upon the beaching method taking place in the Indian subcontinent.

But training workers and organisations to thoroughly identify hazardous materials and how to remove them, and other operational processes, still had to remain a key target.

Mr Blankesten referred to inventory of hazardous material certificates he had seen in use at Bangladesh yards that had supposedly been certified by four different companies, but were in fact signed by the same person from the Marshall Islands. They consisted of just one piece of paper stating there were no PCBs, asbestos and other materials on board the ships.

"Having carried put many inventories myself I know that all have contained asbestos," he said.

"There is something wrong here. All parties have to play together and make inventories properly."

If and when the IMO's Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships comes into force, all owners will be required to put together lists for new and existing ships.

These will be used in conjunction with Ship Recycling Plans and Ship Recycling Facility Plans that have been drawn up for each individual ship to ensure tonnage is dismantled in an environmentally safe process.

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