

No room to let jobs in

The booming oil exploration activity off the west and east coasts of Africa means a growing number of oil rigs will be visiting South African ports for maintenance and repairs in future. But not Durban, Africa's busiest port.



Ben Martins

Cape Town harbour is so busy doing repair work on oil rigs that some are having to wait outside. Work is also under way at Saldanha Bay and even at the smaller port of Ngqura (Coega).

So why not in Durban? Ship repair companies have to apply to Transnet National Ports Authority (TNPA) to bring in vessels classed as abnormal or very large, but say when making these applications to work on an oil rig in Durban they are turned down.

"It's frustrating and the paperwork is so intense, it's probably not worth it in the end. It seems the port is reluctant to allow in any vessels for repair that will occupy a commercial berth," says Gary Pulford, international marketing director at marine engineering company Dormac. "We are repairing oil rigs at other ports and it creates a lot of employment. But applications for Durban are turned down."

Senior government and Transnet officials have acknowledged the opportunities that could flow from oil rig repairs and have encouraged the ports and maritime engineering industry to take advantage of them.

Speaking at the SA Maritime Industry Conference in Cape Town in July, transport minister Ben Martins said at least 5,000 jobs could be created by providing ship and oil rig repair and maintenance. "Repair work driven by the expected explorations could create about between 4,000 and 5,000 direct jobs and a further 1,000 indirect jobs," he said, adding that about 250 oil and gas exploration projects will get underway off the coast of West Africa in the next five years.

TNPA chief executive Tau Morwe said the maritime industry needed to "think out of the box" and take advantage of the

boom.

But new Durban Port manager Thami Ntshingila sounded bemused when the *Financial Mail* first contacted him. "There are no facilities to repair oil rigs in Durban," he said. Asked about applications being turned down, he said he hadn't heard of this happening. "I will find out. If we are approached by a customer we will look at the application."

Ntshingila later clarified why applications were being turned down.

"From TNPA's perspective, it does make sense to do work on oil rigs in Durban. The problem is the channel, Maydon Wharf channel, is too narrow for the rigs. We can't risk an accident. For this reason the chief harbour master, Rufus Lekala, says no oil rigs for Durban. That's why the applications are turned down."

Why then is some of TNPA's infrastructure budget for Durban, much of it unaccounted for, not spent on widening the channel?

Prasheen Maharaj, executive director at Southern African Shipyards, says he suspects TNPA, which is charged with running the port on a commercial basis, fears that repairing oil rigs will affect logistics operations in Durban. "[TNPA's] focus is on container shipping and cargo. I think they see ship repairs as an irritant. And while they might have a more positive view on repairing oil rigs, the wheels turn very slowly."

Maharaj believes the ship repair industry needs to get together, develop a business case for the oil and gas node, and present it to TNPA.

Ntshingila seems to be thinking along similar lines. "I will discuss oil rig repairs with the ship repair companies," he says.

That would be a good start, if Durban is ever going to see an oil rig in the port again.

Source: *Financial Mail* via I-Net Bridge

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