Toxic waste dumping in the Third World

In recent years, industrialised countries have been trying hard to export their toxic waste to Third World countries. South and Central America have received toxic waste in the past, and now African countries have been offered cash to accept such waste.

The extent of the problem is more massive than previously realised. A study by the Greenpeace Environmental Organisation lists 115 shipments of toxic waste during the past two years that have been sent to Latin American and African countries1 including Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Panama, Uruguay, Morocco, Senegal, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Djibouti, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Among the shipments or planned shipments of toxic waste to the Third World are the following:

- 15,000 tonnes of toxic industrial incinerator ash from Philadelphia, US, were dumped on the Guinean island of Kassa, with a Norwegian company acting as middleman. The toxic ash killed a large part of the island’s vegetation. Guinea importers were paid US$40 per ton for waste which might have cost US$1000 per ton to dispose of in the US in compliance with government regulations. On 13 June 1988, Norway agreed to remove the waste following the arrest by Guinea of Norway’s Consul-General Sigmund Strome for complicity in the dumping. Mr Strome is also director of Guinomar, the joint

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Norwegian-Guinean company which imported the waste.

- Up to 4,000 metric tons of chemical (and possibly radioactive) waste from Italy was dumped in the port of Koko in Nigeria. The waste, including deadly dioxin poly-chlorobiphenyl (PCB), had been shipped from Italy in drums and containers in several consignments from September 1987 onwards. Italian and Nigerian businessmen arranged the deal and paid the owner of the depot a mere 500 Naira (about $250) a month to store the waste which had been brought in by a white man.* Another Italian businessman had also planned to export nearly 100,000 tonnes of waste (including PCB, exhausted earths, asbestos fibres and assorted pharmaceutical and industrial residues) to Nigeria.

- In the Congo, a number of individuals agreed to import 1 million tons of industrial waste that would have made US$44m over three years. The Dutch transport company Van Santen had announced in May that it had received a Congo government licence authorising shipment of the waste.

- Secso, a British company (with a Gibraltar postal address), offered a contract to the West African country of Benin to store 5 million tonnes of waste. Benin was offered US$2.50 a tonne, compared to 400 a tonne offered by other companies to Guinea Bissau and the normal cost of disposing of waste in Europe at US$140-160 per tonne.

- Guinea Bissau was offered US$120m a year (equivalent to its gross national product) by one Swiss and two British firms to bury industrial waste.

- A West German-based company is planning to export to Liberia a range of hazardous wastes, including contaminated earth. The company, quoted in the Greenpeace report, cites ‘adequate dumping capacity’, ‘political stability because it is closely allied to the United States’ and its good location as to why Liberia was a suitable dump. It also states: ‘We can solve the waste problem in West Germany by building a depot in Liberia.’

- Another document revealed by Greenpeace shows plans to build a US$100m US-financed waste incinerator plant in Tonga with a capacity to burn up to 20 tons of toxic waste per year.

In addition to the US and Europe, Japan is also likely to be a party to toxic waste dumping. In 1979, the Japanese government announced an ‘experiment’ to dump 10,000 drums of low-level nuclear waste in the South Pacific, near the Mariana Islands. If the experiment was ‘successful’, Japan would dump up to 100,000 curies a year at the same site. The scheme was postponed following protests from Pacific Island countries. Japan, with twenty-five reactors and another fifty-eight being planned, now stores high-level nuclear waste in temporary sites; it also has 460,000 containers of low-level waste stored in metal containers and this is growing by 60,000 annually. Both Japan and the US threaten to dump their nuclear waste in the South Pacific.

However, toxic waste dumping is not only carried out by industrialised countries. According to the Thai newspaper, the Nation, thousands of falsely marked containers of toxic waste were lying unclaimed at Bangkok’s Klong Toey Port for years. They had been shipped from Singapore to bogus companies in Thailand. The rusting and broken containers were discovered lying in an outdoor yard and were, according to a United Nations expert, contaminating the water supply of a densely populated slum nearby.

**The trade and its causes**

The dumping of such huge amounts of hazardous waste matter in Third World countries stems from the application of restrictive disposal regulations in the industrialised countries, designed to protect their own health and environment. So, while the beneficial part of the production process goes to the industrialised countries, the worst part (the toxic wastes) is channelled to the Third World, which does not even glean any benefit from the actual product or process involved. And, in recent years, toxic waste regulations have become more and more stringent in the West. According to Jan Huismans, director of the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals (an arm of the UN Environment Programme): ‘In the Netherlands, you virtually can’t put anything anywhere, because it’s hard to dispose of it without bringing it in contact with the water table. France, the United Kingdom and West Germany have stringent regulations, and Denmark and Sweden require very detailed technology.’ Reluctant to comply with the stringent and costly rules on toxic waste disposal, western companies chose the easy way out, of dumping toxic waste in poor countries with large areas of land. These Third World countries have hardly any regulations (if any) restricting or controlling toxic waste disposal.

The dumping of toxic waste is often the result of legal contracts by companies or governments of Third World countries to accept waste from industrialised countries in exchange for hard cash. There have been two ‘waves’ of such contracts. The first, in 1980, involved the US.

* The waste was eventually returned to Italy after much difficulty and delay. One of the few such consignments to become internationally notorious – the Karin B – it was refused entry at ports throughout Europe.
and coincided with the tightening up of laws concerning toxic waste there. The second wave in 1987 and 1988, involving European countries, was probably linked to the 1986 EEC directive and decisions arrived at by the Organisation of European Cooperation and Development (OECD) on the transportation of toxic waste. Western companies find it much cheaper to export toxic wastes to the Third World than to dispose of them in their own countries. Such companies are currently offering African countries US$40 per ton of toxic waste. In comparison, the dumping of waste in Europe may cost between US$160 and US$1,000 per ton, according to the Greenpeace study on toxic waste.

In other cases, however, the toxic waste is dumped illegally. The lure of money may be too attractive for many Third World officials to resist, so bribery is used by unscrupulous parties to solicit for illegal dumping. Furthermore, regulatory and administrative responsibilities in most developing countries are badly defined and there is no clear line of authority. For example, among the five people arrested in the Congo on charges of establishing a fictitious company with the intent of covertly accepting 1 million metric tons of industrial waste were three top government officials. In an earlier case, Congolese officials had agreed to accept 1 million metric tons of polluted chemical waste from the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and West Germany for storage or incineration in exchange for US$92.6m.

Toxic waste disposal has sprouted its own industry which makes profit from dumping. Companies have sprung up in the industrialised countries which specialise in buying toxic wastes from industrial plants or government agencies and arranging for them to be shipped to Third World countries. According to Greenpeace, Britain has become a concentrating point for the international waste disposal industry.

Household waste from the United States is exported to the United Kingdom where it is being dumped in old mine shafts in a very irresponsible manner, reported Mr Ernest Klatte, the Greenpeace representative in Brussels. He added that many waste disposal companies are also operating from London, including one which is responsible for large-scale waste exports to Guinea Bissau.

The activities of companies in the US that buy toxic waste for sale to the Third World have been documented by David Weir and Andrew Porterfield of the Center for Investigative Reporting in San Francisco. The biggest known operation was run by two New York-based men, who amassed a huge volume of various kinds of hazardous wastes (including outdated pesticides, industrial chemicals and solvents) and stored them in warehouses up and down the east coast. Some of the wastes were relabelled as pure dry cleaning solvent and sold to a company in Zimbabwe which bought it with funds from the US Agency for International Development. What was particularly shocking was that not only companies but also many US government agencies (including the US Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, many city governments and various branches of the military) sold their wastes to this organisation.

In another case investigated by Weir and Porterfield, a Norwegian firm registered in the US was planning to export 250,000 tons of Philadelphia incinerator ash to Panama to build a roadbed through a wetlands area. If this deal were to work out, Panama would import a total $17 million tons of the hazardous ash for one roadbed project alone. The road would be part of a big development project along the Panama coast including a resort hotel, to be built by the Norwegian parent company. (This is the same Philadelphia ash, 15,000 tons of which was actually shipped to Guinea.)

The US produces between 250 to 400 million metric tons of toxic wastes a year. As landfills and dumps fill up in the country, it looks desperately to other countries to receive its wastes.

Effects on the Third World

Toxic wastes are the world's most unwanted products. Because awareness is growing of how intractable the toxic waste problem is, many industrialised countries have recently introduced tighter laws forcing polluting industries to treat their waste material, or to store it as safely as possible, as well as pay for expenses incurred by the state in cleaning up their wastes. But the toxic by-products of industry are very difficult, if not impossible, to make safe before disposal. It is very expensive to treat many of the wastes to a satisfactory degree of safety. In the case of other wastes, especially radioactive or nuclear waste, it is quite impossible to make them safe; for millions or even billions of years some of these wastes will remain radioactive, and thus dangerous. Containers made to store them, however solid and strong, and dumpsites built to take in such containers, however concrete, will not last long enough. Toxic chemicals or radioactive materials and other wastes will usually have a much longer lifespan and may well seep through what are, by then, rusted or broken containers and dumps, into the air or through the soil and into the water system. The waste materials could then emerge through the food chain: from the soil to plants and vegetation taken in by human beings or by animals (which, in turn, supply meat or milk to human beings); from the water system to reservoirs and household water. Or certain materials (especially radioactive waste) could enter the body and bloodstream through the very air that people breathe. For all these reasons, the companies and
industries involved now try to export their untreated wastes to the
Third World.

The Third World is even more ill-equipped than the industrialised
countries to deal with toxic wastes. Environmental awareness is still
lacking among most Third World policy-makers; there are hardly any
laws regulating waste disposal, and very little action on the ground by
governments to monitor, let alone act against, the storage and
disposal of toxic wastes.

Inadequate toxic waste disposal in the Third World has many
negative effects, both in regard to the wastes generated within the
Third World itself and the wastes imported from other countries.
These include environmental, health and economic costs.

The environment
If dumped indiscriminately on land or in rivers, the wastes have an
immediate effect in contaminating the soil, killing surrounding vegetation, polluting the underground water system; or in contaminating the riverine and sea resources, including the killing of marine life. Even if
the wastes are stored in containers and carefully placed in concrete
dumps, they will most likely escape in future (from a few months to a
few decades) as the containers and sites corrode with time. After escape, the environment will then be damaged. In many Third World
countries, the rivers have been polluted by industrial effluents from
factories and mills, killing off fish resources, reducing the incomes of
fisherfolk, and threatening the safety of millions of villagers who
depend on the river for water. Soil which is contaminated is also made
useless for agriculture. Environmental damage thus depletes precious
resources, and threatens human health.

Health
The thousands of chemicals and radioactive substances produced by
industry are poisonous to health and can kill. The results can be
horrendous.

- In the US, the Hooker Chemical Company dumped thousands of
drums of toxic waste at Love Canal, New York, in the 1940s. In the
late 1970s, foul-smelling liquids and sludge seeped into the basement
of houses built on top of the dump. A health emergency was declared,
and in 1980 tests showed some residents had damaged chromosomes
(raising the spectre of cancer among the living and unpredictable
damage to future generations); and increased rates of cancer, se-
izures, miscarriages and birth defects.

- In Morocco, thirty-one children died of lead poisoning due to waste
from a lead works being dumped in the middle of a village.

- In Japan, mercury poisoning of water at Minamata Bay caused
thousands of birth defects and other ailments. Japanese industry paid
over US$200m to compensate thousands of victims.

- In Malaysia, a company producing rare earths (partly owned by
Mitsubishi of Japan) was found to have disposed of its radioactive
waste indiscriminately for some years; the waste is now stored in the
factory compound pending transfer to a dumpsite. Medical tests in
early 1988 found that all children tested had lead in the blood above
the toxic level.

The economy
Because of the health threat posed by toxic wastes, they need to be
treated or stored properly. That bears very heavy economic costs.
Another big cost is to 'clean up' toxic wastes which already exist and
which have over past decades, been dumped carelessly or inadequa-
tely in unsatisfactory sites, either on land or in water.

In the US the Environmental Protection Agency has identified
74,000 dumpsites, of which 32,000 are rated as bad or worse than Love
Canal — only seven or eight a year are being cleaned up under a
'superfund' financing system. In 1980, the President's Council on
Environmental Quality estimated the cost of cleaning up would be
US$28-55 billion. In Love Canal alone the clean-up bill was estimated
at US$130m.

Thus, even from the economic aspect, it is not worthwhile for Third
World countries to accept the toxic wastes offered to them in exchange
for money. The short-term monetary gain from importing toxic wastes
would be very meagre indeed compared to the damage to health and
environment, as well as the eventual costs needed to clean up the
wastes when they are, at last, recognised as damaging to the health
and ecology of the Third World countries concerned.

Moves against toxic waste export
After the scandal of toxic waste export to some African countries was
exposed, there have been a number of moves in the Third World to
prevent toxic wastes from entering, or to reduce their volume. The
most important of these was a resolution passed by the Organisation
of African Unity at the end of May 1988 condemning the use of
African territory as a dumping ground for waste. It called this practice
'a crime against Africa and the African people'. The resolution also
called for a ban on the importation of hazardous and industrial wastes
to the continent, and urged African governments which had already
concluded agreements for dumping waste on their territory to end the
agreements.
Following the resolution, a number of African governments took action to investigate and stop toxic waste dumping, or to act against those responsible for the practice. In June 1988 Guinea Bissau banned toxic waste imports, reversing its earlier agreement to accept toxic wastes from three European companies, and thus gave up the US$120m a year it had been offered. Also in June 1988, the government of the Congo – as has been described – arrested five people, including three government officials, for attempting to import toxic waste, and banned all imports of wastes. Guinea, as was noted, arrested a Norwegian official for importing toxic ash from the US and forced Norway to remove the waste. Nigeria recalled its ambassador in Rome, arrested fifteen people responsible for importing wastes from Italy, threatened to execute the importers, and forced Italy to remove the waste.

The publicity on waste export to Africa also spurred officials in some Asian countries to act on their own waste imports. The Thai government found toxic waste dumped at Bangkok port that came from the US, Japan, West Germany, Singapore and Taiwan. Shipping agents were asked to send containers of toxic wastes back to Singapore. In the Philippines, eight government departments made a joint resolution banning the importation of toxic wastes and called on Congress to enact laws to protect the environment from harmful wastes. The resolution arose after an American firm attempted to build an incineration plant in Iligan City in 1987. In Lebanon, officials found 2,411 tonnes of wastes dumped since September 1987 in the country by Italy; the Italian government has now agreed to remove the waste by ship.

At the international level, some moves are also being made to counter the toxic waste trade. The United Nations Environment Programme is making efforts to get governments to adopt an international convention to control the international movement of hazardous wastes. Two meetings were held in February and June 1988, and at the time of writing, a third was scheduled for September 1988; a conference to conclude the treaty is targeted for March 1989 in Basel, Switzerland. As at July 1988, an expert group looking into the treaty has drawn up a core list of forty-four waste materials considered ‘hazardous’. In the negotiations it was also agreed that intending exporters should give information on the nature of the waste, quantities and number of shipments. A country intending to import wastes has to give a written consent before the hazardous wastes are shipped, and it must also show evidence of its capacity to deal with the waste. For instance, it must show that the waste will be going to a treatment or disposal facility that has the capacity and is licensed to deal with that particular waste. However, there are still many loopholes and areas of contention in the treaty which negotiators have to iron out. Nor will the ratification of such a treaty prevent toxic waste exports unless an international team of experts with sufficient power and resources is able to monitor whether the importing countries can store or are storing those wastes safely.

Within Europe, a number of moves have been taken to discourage toxic waste export to poor countries. In 1986, the EEC sent a directive stipulating that developing countries must give their ‘prior informed consent’ before exports can go ahead, and that the importing countries must be capable of treating the wastes so as to render them harmless. However, only Belgium and Denmark have so far incorporated the directive into their national laws. Even if the laws were to be enacted, they may well be impossible to implement satisfactorily. At present, there are no international norms on what is proper waste treatment, so it would not be possible to decide whether an importing country can properly treat the wastes.

In May 1988, the European Parliament passed a resolution to ban all exports of European wastes to the Third World. On 17 June 1988, the EEC countries’ environment ministers met and considered the European Parliament’s resolution but decided not to agree to a ban. The British and West German ministers argued that a complete ban was ‘impractical’ and would be unfair to developing countries willing to take such wastes. Instead, the ministers called on EEC countries to implement existing rules or to alter the rules to prevent dumping on poor countries. They did not specify how these existing rules could be changed to prevent illegal waste export. They admitted, however, that waste exports had increased rather than decreased since the 1986 EEC directive against dumping.

In neither the US or Japan or many other industrial countries, are any moves being made by governments to tighten control or impose a ban on toxic waste exports to the Third World.

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Environmental groups, other citizen groups and non-governmental organisations in both the industrialised countries and in the Third World have a vital role to play in highlighting the problem of toxic waste exports as well as the general problem of toxic waste disposal and toxic substances. In fact, the scandal of toxic waste exports to the Third World was first exposed by journalists and by environmental groups; without that exposure it is doubtful if governments would have been alerted or felt sufficiently moved to act.

The Third World Network, along with its related organisations and friends, will continue to play its part in monitoring the issue and contribute to the reduction of toxic waste exports to the Third World.
The Third World Network

The Third World Network, established in November 1984 and based in Penang, Malaysia, is made up of groups and individuals involved in efforts to bring about a greater articulation of the needs and rights of peoples in the Third World; a fair distribution of world resources, and forms of development which fulfil peoples' needs and are ecologically and humanly harmonious. It aims to establish links and cooperation between individuals and groups which are actively involved in development and Third World issues both in the South and the North.

The Third World Network produces a News Feature Service, by Third World journalists; compiles special dossiers on crucial current issues; publishes books and pamphlets on a range of subjects; publicises urgent problems through its special 'Alerts for Action', and holds seminars, workshops and training programmes.

Specialist networks have been established in the following areas: the Third World Science Movement, the World Rainforest Movement, Third World Concerned Lawyers, and a Programme for Peoples' Economics. The Third World Network has secretariats in Indonesia, Thailand, India, Brazil and Uruguay.

Recent publications include: Third World: Development or Crisis?; Dismantling the Narmada: Modern Science in Crisis: the Third World Response; Forestry Crisis and Forestry Myths and The Indian Drought 1987-88.

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Sri Lanka: the choice of two terrors

While a stalemate in the predominantly Tamil North and East of Sri Lanka continues despite Indian intervention on the government's behalf, in the Sinhala South death squads associated with the pseudo People's Liberation Front, the JVP, have been ruthlessly eliminating its opponents. The United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), having created and nurtured popular racism for over thirty years in order to get into power (through a ready-made Sinhalese majority of 70 per cent of the population),* would now like to draw back from the brink of another crippling civil war, this time in the South. But they are unable to do so because the JVP has taken up the Sinhala cause and pushed it to the point of social fascism through assassination and murder.

Popular racism based on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism promoted in the schools and expressed in song, textbook and media served to fuel the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983, in which thousands were killed at the hands of street mobs. Some of the most violently anti-Tamil propaganda (deriving inspiration from mythical Sinhalese history) has emanated from the present government. Colonisation of Tamil areas by Sinhalese was justified on the pretext of protecting ancient Buddhist shrines. And it is an open secret that ministers hired their own hit squads in the 1983 pogrom.

When, in a bid to end the unwinnable war with the Tamils, the UNP