

would receive \$2.50 a ton together with an investment of 50 cents per ton in its agricultural development and tourist industry. It was only when the Minister of Health – who had not been informed of the proposal – joined local ecologists in lodging strong protests with the President, that the deal was abandoned.

Nigeria. On 2 June of this year the Rome newspaper *Il Mondo* ran stories on the traffic in toxic waste between Italy and Nigeria. Its claims were proved accurate when 2,000 barrels were discovered in the Nigerian port of Koko; two hundred barrels contained polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and traces of radioactivity were also detected. A Danish cargo ship had unloaded the barrels in October and November 1987. Loaded in Pisa, this cargo had originally been refused entry by Romania. The affair led to a diplomatic crisis between Lagos and Rome and fifteen people were arrested in Nigeria, including two Italians. The Nigerian government has subsequently announced that it may impose capital punishment. In the meantime, dozens of inhabitants of Koko are in hospital undergoing treatment for nervous disorders – just a coincidence?

Zaire, Equatorial Guinea, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Mauritania, Haiti, Venezuela, Brazil, Syria, Lebanon, the Bahamas, Panama, Guatemala, India, South Korea – in the last two years these and many other countries have been front-page news because of attempts to unload hazardous waste originating in the West. In most of these instances the exporters seem to have been foiled in their attempts, however, experts estimate that for every failed attempt at least seven other cargoes have been delivered without difficulty.

WHAT IS ESPECIALLY SERIOUS, IF not criminal, is the fact that the countries receiving this toxic waste usually lack the technical means to handle the goods they are getting. There is rarely any study of the geology of the waste storage sites, so that toxic material may well contaminate drinking water and fishing resources. It is conceivable that the substances being transported will remain haz-

ardous for decades, centuries in the case of certain organic materials. As for medical problems, these countries are in no way prepared to deal with what lies ahead, especially if they do not know the exact nature of the substances involved.

Seveso (Italy), Love Canal (the United States), Lekkerkerk (Netherlands), the metallurgical factory Hoboken-Overpelt (Belgium), Georgswerder (West Germany), St-Basile-le-Grand (Canada), Los Alfaques (Spain) – these names and others are evidence of the



West's failure to get its act together as far as toxic waste is concerned. In 1985 the US Environmental Protection Agency listed 21,512 sites as potentially dangerous. In Britain the government estimates 10,000 hectares of land are contaminated. The situation is almost as bad in Europe and Japan. In 1983 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimated that 5,000 loads of toxic waste had gone between Canada and the US during the course of the year, and that 100,000 had been transferred from one European member to another.

In addition, there are the problems not fully understood by scientists connected with synergistic reactions (chemical interactions) of various waste products stored together. And the problem is made worse by the fact that industry introduces approximately 2,000 new substances every year, making it impossible to chart the extent of the hazard.

Nonetheless, the scandals and the spectacle of ships wandering the globe have had some positive effects. The populations most at risk, particularly those on the coast of West Africa, are now aware of the danger. Legal actions now underway, for example in Guinea and Nigeria, are likely to prove a deterrent, particularly if European or American middlemen are found guilty or worse still condemned to death. Several of the countries which have been used as garbage dumps are now trying to

protect themselves through stricter international regulations. At a meeting of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) early in 1988 there was talk of an all-out effort to halt "toxic terrorism."

But we should have no illusions. The West's export of toxic waste to poor countries is, at the moment, almost as profitable – and less risky – than either the arms trade or the drug trade. This year's scandals have also shown that there is a whole network – a toxic waste "Mafia" – at work, often with the paid connivance of officials and leaders in the importing countries.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION? OBVIOUSLY the industries concerned will have to deal with these problems by themselves or at least among themselves. There must be much more emphasis on treating waste rather than storing it, however expensive such a change in strategy may prove. In September 1988, Italy – one of the largest exporters of waste after the United States –

announced that five of its cargo ships which had spent months looking for somewhere to dump their waste had returned to Italian ports. Several other countries including Belgium, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands and France have announced that they are tightening up their regulations. At the international level the OECD, the European Economic Community, the Organization for African Unity and the United Nations Environment Programme are now trying to draw up statutes to deal with the problem.

There is no inclination to place an outright ban on the export of toxic waste. Rather, what is under consideration is the imposition of much stricter controls. Exporters would have to provide a clear description of the substances involved and would be required to prove not only that the importer had agreed to accept the materials, but that it also possessed the technical means required to store or destroy them. Under the aegis of the United Nations, an international toxic waste convention may be signed in March 1989 in Basel, Switzerland – an international centre of the chemical industry. Eastern Bloc countries have begun to realize that their own waste, when added to that transferred from the West at a handsome price, is likely to prove perilous; they also are playing an active part in preparing this document.

The West must take some action, for the present situation is destabilizing. Apart from the fact that it involves flagrant political and economic injustice and endangers the health of entire populations, this issue has serious implications for international relations. With this traffic in waste, the rift between the North and the South grows deeper. Trust between nations, an essential requirement for peace and security, is reduced to a meaningless concept. □

(Translation by Mary Taylor)

For Further Reading:

J.P. Hannequart. "La politique de gestion des déchets," Institut pour une politique européenne de l'environnement, Berlin, 1983.

Jeune Afrique, Enquête, July 1988.

New York Times, "Waste Dumpers Turning to West Africa," 17 July 1988.