

GARBAGE DUMP FOR THE WEST

The business of exporting toxic waste from rich, industrial countries to poor, debt-ridden ones is almost as profitable – and a lot less risky – than either drug trafficking or the arms trade.

BY ALAIN BORGOGNON

IT IS NOTHING NEW FOR WESTERN developed countries to get rid of whatever is dangerous or undesirable by sending it as far away as possible. As long ago as the eighteenth-century, France was sending convicts to Devil's Island, and England was sending them to Australia. So far as the disposal of toxic waste is concerned, history is only repeating itself.

It has been known for some years that rich countries were disposing of toxic waste by sending it to "Garbage Can States." However, apart from a few incidents, things had gone fairly well for both the exporters and importers. The scandal finally broke in 1988.

Karim B, Khian Sea, Bark, and Lynx among others, are the names of cursed cargo ships the media has brought to the attention of the whole world. The tribulations of these ships, some with sick crew members on board, made front-page news as they sailed from port to port in search of a place to drop anchor. Suddenly, no one wanted anything to do with the noxious cargoes which, until then, had attracted scant attention.

Too many countries, too much garbage, too many middlemen, too much money, too many accidents – this "trade" could no longer be kept a secret. As a result of pressure from the media and from certain courageous politicians, tongues began to wag and the truth came out: the South was being used as a garbage dump for the industrial pollution of the North. Put more charitably, one could say that the West was purging itself of toxic waste that was beginning to choke it while at the same time showering money on debt-ridden poor countries.

It is estimated that every year the industrialized countries have to dispose of 400 million tons of dangerous industrial waste. Almost all the industrialized countries – with the United States clearly in the lead – have exported or tried to export their toxic waste; an activity carried on by corporations with the more or less tacit approval of national governments. The list of those which import this waste is also very long. It includes many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Certain states in Eastern Europe also accept large quantities of waste from the capitalist West in order to satisfy their need for hard currency. The trade between the two Germanies is as impressive as it is discreet since it involves the transfer of 700,000 tons of waste from the West to the East every year.

THIS COMMERCE, WIDELY REGARDED as immoral, has arisen partly out of political expediency, but above all in response to the economic needs of Western industry. The latter pays between US \$2.50 and \$40 a ton for the waste it sends to Africa, compared to the \$75 to \$300 it would take to deal with at home. According to another estimate it costs approximately \$2,400 to "detoxify" a ton of this waste in the US, Europe or Japan. From an economic point of view, therefore, it is much more profitable to send it South.

Apart from the financial considerations there are important political factors at work: First, the ecological movement is gaining support in the developed world; and second, as a result of this con-

cern, industry is faced with increasingly rigorous national regulations which forbid the dumping of almost anything, anywhere in their home territories.

It is important to note that none of the recent scandals have come to light through the actions of Western governments. Usually the administrations involved do no more than note the intentions of those exporting the waste. Most frequently, and this is true in the US, officials check that the export documents are in order – that the country to which "the goods" are being sent is prepared to receive them. After all, there is nothing illegal about such deals if both countries have agreed to it. That is how, last year alone, four-hundred ships laden with toxic waste legally left US ports bound for Canada, Europe, Asia and Africa.

How many of these ships did in fact unload their cargo at their destination? How many dumped their loads at sea and paid their crews to keep quiet? How many secret dumps for toxic waste are there in West Africa alone? How many people have suffered or are still suffering from contact with products which have been stored near them and which they know nothing about? There are no figures available; the recent scandals may well be only the tip of the iceberg.

Guinea Bissau. About a year ago a company based in the Isle of Man contacted the Minister for Natural Resources in Guinea Bissau concerning the possibility of storing US pharmaceutical waste at Binta. The deal involved three million tons a year for five years at \$40 a ton. That added up to \$600 million for Guinea Bissau – twice its external debt, three times

its gross domestic product and twenty-five times its annual export earnings. It was the deal of the century. On 9 February 1988 a preliminary agreement was signed. But in April, as a result of a leak, the source of which remains unknown, the affair was reported by the Portuguese newspaper *Lusa* and the project was abandoned.

Guinea. On 16 February of this year the cargo ship *Bark* unloaded 14,500 tons of ashes, which had come from an incinerator in Philadelphia, on the island of Kassa opposite Conakry. Apparently the local authorities were unaware of what was happening and the question of toxic waste was never raised. The talk was of ashes and construction material. However, the appalling odour which soon arose, and the fact that the surrounding vegetation was dying, led the local population to protest. In the resulting uproar, the President of Guinea imprisoned the officials concerned for corruption and complicity. The Norwegian Consul in Conakry was also implicated. It was ultimately revealed that 85,000 tons of ashes – previously refused entry by Panama because they were hazardous – were to be stored at Kassa at the cost of \$12 a ton. In June, Norway sent a cargo ship to take back this waste and clean up the site in Guinea. The waste in question is now being stored in Ohio.

Benin. On 12 January 1988 a Gibraltar firm signed a contract with four government ministers from Benin. The project involved storing hundreds of thousands of tons of industrial sludge, polymerized material, mineral waste, and of other substances "to be agreed upon as the need arose." Benin