

Toxic chemical spill kills and maims east African dockworkers

Our correspondent
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The British Government has ordered the return of a shipment of more than 300 tonnes of chemicals plus 2,000 tonnes of contaminated soil from the city-state port of Djibouti on the Horn of Africa to the United Kingdom. The highly toxic chemical, which arrived in Djibouti in January, contains chromic acid and arsenic and was bound for Ethiopia via the Ethiopian Shipping Line.

The cargo was contained in hundreds of plastic jerrycans, ten of which had spilled, contaminating a considerable area of Djibouti port. Reports described the result of the spillage as a “catastrophe”. The substance poisoned those dockworkers coming into contact with it, burning their skin and damaging their lungs. Three dockers died within days and more than 20 have become seriously ill as a result of the spillage.

The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) warned that the damaged drums posed a threat to human health and the environment and has financed a major operation to attempt to clean up the seriously contaminated port. The worst affected site is within 400 metres of a food store and there is continued concern for the health and safety of dockworkers.

A spokesman for the FAO said that previous shipments of the chemical had used steel drums, rather than plastic, and there had been no previous leakages. UN expert Kevin Helps, who investigated the spillage, said “in ten years of doing this work of intervention at ports in the EU [European Union], I have never seen such a case. In the EU, someone would have been prosecuted within weeks. It is not an accident. Someone is responsible for this.”

A spokesman for the chemicals’ producers CSI Wood Protection, a US-owned company based in Widnes, north-west England, claimed, “the product was

shipped in drums represented to us as suitable for such use and the containers were independently inspected prior to loading in the UK.”

Environmental Minister Michael Meacher has authorised expenditure of £1 million (\$1.6 million) to ship the toxic cargo and contaminated soil back to England. He told a BBC radio programme that investigated the spillage that the “polluter will pay”.

The chemical is widely used in the US to protect fences, boardwalks, picnic tables and other wooden structures. In the past two months concerns have been raised about children playing on equipment treated with the substance. Alternatives that do not contain arsenic are being widely used in Japan, Australia and Europe. A spokesman for the US industry claimed that such substitutes were not available in America due to lack of public demand.



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