

Toxic waste dumping in Ivory Coast

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24 October 2006

In September eight people died and over 80,000 had to seek medical treatment for symptoms including vomiting, nosebleeds and breathing difficulties in Abidjan, the main city of the West African country of Ivory Coast. The cause of the deaths and medical problems was the dumping of toxic waste at around 14 sites around the city.

The toxic waste, over 500 metric tonnes, had been brought from Europe by an old tanker, the Probo Koala. The Greek owned ship registered in Panama was on hire to the Dutch oil trading company Trafigura Beheer BV.

Salif Oudrawogol explained to the *New York Times* how the foul smell of rotten eggs, garlic and petroleum hit him when he was woken by his son gasping for air. “The smell was so bad we were afraid ... it burned our noses and eyes.” A *BBC* report quoted one resident, “I am ill, I was intoxicated in my neighbourhood, Akouedo ... I am asthmatic and I passed out.”

There were protests in Abidjan over the deaths and illness caused by the toxic waste. The cabinet of Prime Minister Charles Konan Banny resigned as a result of the health emergency, though Banny has quickly formed a new cabinet containing most of the previous ministers. The environment and transport ministers—held to account by the protesters—were replaced. At one point the protesters had dragged the then transport minister, Innocent Anaky Kobenan, from his car and beat him. They also set fire to the house of the port director Marcel Gossio.

The waste from the ship had been brought in the hold of the Probo Koala along with a shipment of petroleum that was delivered to Nigeria. After offloading the petroleum the ship put into Abidjan in mid-August. Once there the waste was transferred to tanker lorries that—under the cover of night—dispersed the foul substance at 14 different dump sites around the city. Many sites were near fields growing food or near water

supplies.

According to an article in the September 18 *International Der Spiegel*, a company called Tommy carried out the tankering of the waste. The company, which was only set up in July this year, was awarded the contract to dump the waste by a company called Puma Energy. According to the *Der Spiegel* article both the Dutch Trafigura company and members of the family of the Ivorian president, Laurent Gbagbo, hold shares in Puma Energy. Local newspapers came under pressure and two journalists were arrested after investigating what they described as the “Ivorian Chernobyl.”

The ship had set sail for Africa from Europe to deliver the petroleum to Nigeria together with the toxic waste, after initially attempting to dispose of the waste in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam Port Services (APS) had been commissioned to treat and dispose of the liquid waste from the ship that had been described as “waste water.” The waste was pumped into APS facilities where the strong stench led to local residents contacting the police. APS analysed the waste and found it to contain mercaptan, a sulphur containing hydrocarbon, found in some types of crude oil and as a product of decaying vegetable matter. It is highly pungent and toxic.

Because of the nature of the waste, it would have cost \$250,000 to treat and the ship would have also incurred costs because the treatment would have delayed its arrival for its next contract. Trafigura management, rather than paying to treat the toxic waste, decided to sail on to the port of Paldiski in Estonia, with the toxic waste in the hold. Once at Paldiski the ship took on the cargo of petroleum for delivery to Nigeria and then on to Abidjan where it unloaded the toxic waste.

The ship then returned to the Estonian port of Paldiski, where the environmental group Greenpeace blockaded it to provoke the authorities into taking

action. The Estonian government has now impounded the ship on suspicion of it releasing similar toxins to those dumped in Abidjan into the Baltic Sea. The Ivory Coast government has also requested the ship be held.

Under international regulations drawn up in the Basel Convention relating to the transport of hazardous waste, the ship should not have been allowed to leave Amsterdam where the ship had tried to have the waste removed for treatment. However, because of cost the waste was pumped back on board.

Hamburg-based toxicity expert Andreas Bernstorff said that port authorities in Amsterdam “should have forced the Probo Koala to go to the incinerator located nearby in Rotterdam.... Following the convention the port authorities ... should not have allowed the Probo Koala to continue its route as if nothing wrong had happened.”

The Basel convention was set up to prevent toxic and noxious waste from industrialised countries being dumped in undeveloped countries. The agreement came into being following the 1988 dumping of toxic waste in Koko in Nigeria by an Italian company.

An agreement was signed in 1989 and was finally adopted in 1995. However, there is disagreement over interpretation of the text of the agreement and some countries have failed to sign up, weakening the convention. As might be expected, the United States, the biggest producer of hazardous waste per capita, has not ratified the agreement. But the European Union is a signatory and so the dumping of waste by the Dutch company in Abidjan should not have been permitted.

The US-based Basel Action Network (BAN), set up to monitor the impact of trade in toxic materials, stated in a September 26 report: “[T]he recent dumping scandal in Cote D’Ivoire is but one example of what appears to be an alarming resurgence of a waste trade epidemic ... seaports in Asia and Africa are daily being inundated with container loads of hazardous electronic waste as old computers, monitors, phones and other cast-off electronic devices from rich developed countries [are] dumped or sent to primitive recycling operations that endanger workers and the local environment.”

BAN coordinator Jim Puckett stated, “Unfortunately, if it’s easy to poison the poor for profit, unscrupulous operators and businesses will do it.”



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