

FOREIGNERS: OPINIONS ABOUT EVENTS BEYOND OUR BORDERS.

How First-World Garbage Makes Africans Sick

AND WHAT WASHINGTON CAN DO TO CLEAN UP ITS ACT.

By Jeremy Kahn

Posted Friday, Sept. 22, 2006, at 3:22 PM ET



Toxic waste dump site Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Over the last few weeks, a major environmental, medical, and political crisis has unfolded in the West African nation of Ivory Coast. On Aug. 19, a Panamanian-flagged ship owned by a Greek firm and chartered by a leading Dutch commodities broker docked in Abidjan, the country's commercial capital. The ship unloaded between [400 tons and 600 tons](#) of toxic petrochemical waste, which was summarily dumped in open-air sites around the city and poured into the sewer system. Within days, people began to show up in hospitals complaining of symptoms ranging from nosebleeds, diarrhea, and nausea to eye irritation and breathing difficulties. So far, 50,000 people have sought medical attention, seven people have died, and dozens more have been hospitalized after being poisoned by the fumes.

The toxic waste has spread to the large lagoon that divides this city of 5 million—once known as "the Paris of West Africa"—and may have contaminated drinking water and surrounding farm land as well. The war-racked country's Cabinet ministers resigned en masse over what was seen as the government's slow response to the crisis and its alleged complicity in the dumping. This has set back already fragile efforts to restore peace and democracy to Ivory Coast four years after a civil war left the nation divided and economically crippled. Meanwhile, people clamoring for medical attention have overwhelmed Abidjan's hospitals, many of which have run out of critical supplies. International aid organizations have rushed teams to the country to help provide humanitarian assistance and to clean up the waste, a process that is expected to take at

least six weeks. The World Health Organization has said the acute medical crisis is over but has warned of possible long-term health effects from the waste dumping.

If all this is news to you, don't worry. You're certainly not alone. While the toxic-waste scandal has garnered headlines around the world, in the United States the story has been largely relegated to tiny squibs in the "World Briefs" sections of newspapers—if it has been covered at all. None of the country's leading newspapers—the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, or *USA Today*—has run staff-written stories from the scene of the disaster. The story has not been covered by any of the major TV networks. CNN's Anderson Cooper has not rushed off to Abidjan to feel the victims' pain and demand justice on their behalf, as he has with other recent disasters. His cable-news competitors have also missed the story.

Admittedly, it might be hard to generate interest in yet another African tragedy, especially when the number of victims pales in comparison to the toll that poverty, disease, famine, and war routinely inflict on much of that continent. And there have been plenty of other pressing international stories to cover. But people in the United States ought to be paying attention to what is happening in Ivory Coast, if only because it illuminates a little-recognized connection between people here and people in Africa and other parts of the developing world: Too often, it is our garbage that ends up making them sick.

Investigators are still trying to identify the source of the petrochemical waste that was dumped in Abidjan. The chances are that it will be traced to Europe. But each year, the United States exports hundreds of thousands of tons of hazardous waste to other countries—and it is possible that much more is exported illicitly. (Spot inspections at European ports in 2005 found that 47 percent of all waste being exported was being done so illegally.) The United States also exports between 50 percent and 80 percent of its so-called e-waste—used computers, televisions, cell phones, and other electronics. Most of these discarded electronic items—amounting to millions of tons per year—end up in developing countries in Asia and Africa, where they are supposed to be refurbished or recycled. Instead, more often than not, they are simply dumped or burned, releasing potentially dangerous amounts of lead, cadmium, mercury, and other dangerous elements into the air or the ground. Pollution from e-waste originating in the United States and other rich nations has been linked to unsafe conditions in cities in China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Nigeria.

The United States has consistently refused to do more to police the international trade in toxic waste. Following a number of scandals in the 1980s, including a case in which thousands of tons of ash from a Philadelphia waste incinerator were dumped on Haiti's

beaches, international negotiations resulted in a 1989 treaty governing the shipment of hazardous waste. The treaty—known as the [Basel Convention](#)—is relatively toothless, only banning the shipment of waste to one place, Antarctica, and simply requiring that nations consent to having hazardous waste delivered to their shores. Washington signed this treaty, but—with strong opposition from the waste-disposal industry—the U.S. Senate never ratified it, and three consecutive administrations have shown little interest in pushing the issue. Of the [168 signatories](#), the United States is one of only three nations to fail to ratify it. (The others are Afghanistan and, ironically, Haiti.)

The United States has also refused to sign a 1995 [amendment](#) to the treaty that bans outright the export of all hazardous waste from the world's industrialized nations to poorer countries—whether for disposal or recycling. This provision was adopted after it was discovered that businesses were frequently skirting the original Basel Convention's rules by falsely classifying hazardous waste as being bound for recycling. Although then-Vice President Al Gore voiced support for a ban on the shipment of all hazardous waste outside North America, the Clinton administration opposed the amendment, as has the Bush administration.

The ban allows countries to go after people and companies that dump hazardous waste in the developing world. Some environmental groups also hope that by denying the industrialized world a ready place to offload its mountains of dangerous waste, the ban will encourage these countries to devote more energy to their own waste-recycling efforts—and perhaps even reduce their output of toxic materials.

That said, there are reasons to think that the ban may go too far. Some businesses in the developing world perform legitimate and environmentally responsible recycling, and these companies provide important jobs and income. But the United States doesn't have to sign on to the ban to do more to prevent poor nations in Africa and Asia from continuing to serve as dumping grounds for toxic waste.

For starters, it could send an important message by ratifying the original Basel Convention. This would allow Washington to play a more constructive role in international negotiations over the movement of hazardous waste. For instance, it could help develop a system in which developing nations that proved they had the capacity to safely handle hazardous waste could profit from this activity—thus providing an incentive for other poor nations to clean up their act.

More important, the United States could do more to support environmentally responsible recycling and waste disposal in the developing world, particularly e-waste. Right now, the United States Agency for International Development, which supports waste-disposal programs abroad, may in some cases be contributing to the problem. Environmental

groups have criticized USAID for promoting the use of chemical incinerators in the developing world that have been known to produce large quantities of dioxin and other carcinogenic pollutants when used in the United States.

Finally, Washington could support innovative solutions to the problems posed by hazardous waste, such as forcing computer and electronics manufacturers to incorporate the cost of recycling into the price they charge consumers (essentially a recycling tax), similar to the fees some states charge for recycling cans and bottles. Currently, some manufacturers and retailers encourage consumers to ship obsolete products back to them for recycling, but the consumer usually must pay at least \$30 for the service, as well as shipping costs.

Until Washington is willing to take a leadership role on the international trade in hazardous waste, it's likely that many more people in the developing world, like those in Ivory Coast, will end up sickened by our exported garbage. And some day, you might even read about it in the news.

Jeremy Kahn is a writer in Washington, D.C.