

BEHIND SOMALI PIRACY

Chris Milton

The pirates of Somalia became bandits of international notoriety during 2008, hijacking ever more prolific targets, including arms ships, oil tankers and cruise liners, and extracting huge ransoms from their owners.

National governments and NGOs decried their actions as an affront to international maritime law, but few examined the pirates' claim that a far greater crime continues in Somalia: the illegal dumping of toxic waste.

For more than 10 years, environmental and human rights organisations have called on the international community to act to stop this dumping, but successive wars have ensured the crisis has only deepened. Now, as Ethiopian troops withdraw from Somalia and the piracy becomes more subdued, there is hope the issue can be properly investigated and resolved.

In 1997, in the Italian magazine *Famiglia Cristiana*, Greenpeace published a landmark investigation into the dumping, which showed that it started in the late 1980s, and exposed Swiss and Italian companies as brokers for the transportation of hazardous waste from Europe to dumps in Somalia. Subsequent research has also shown that the company employed physically to ship the waste was wholly owned by the Somali government.

When Somalia slipped into civil war in 1992, the waste exporters had to negotiate with local clan warlords, who demanded guns and ammunition to allow the dumping to continue. Many of the ships, having brought weapons or waste, then became trawlers, and left Somali waters with holds full of tuna for onward sale.

An investigation into the murder of the Italian journalist Ilaria Alpi in Somalia in 1994 quotes the warlord Bogor Musa as saying, "It is evident those ships carried military equipment for different factions involved in the civil war", and it is widely believed that Alpi was assassinated because she had incontrovertible evidence of the guns-for-waste trade.

The Greenpeace report briefly made the news and was followed up by the European Green Party tabling a question in the European Parliament about "the dumping of toxic waste from German, French and Italian nuclear power plants and hospitals" in Somalia.

It also prompted a large investigation in Italy, a former colonial power in Somalia. This concluded that around 35 million tonnes of waste had been exported to Somalia for only US\$6.6 billion, leading the environmental group Legambiente to assert Somalia's inland waste dumps are "among the largest in the world".

The Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 served to reinvigorate interest in the continued dumping of hazardous waste in Somalia. Rusting tanks of unidentifiable ooze were washed up on to beaches; villagers began to die of unexplained illnesses and coastal ecosystems collapsed.

In 2005, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) concluded its own on-the-ground investigation in Somalia. Despite being stymied by local political interests and finding no tangible proof, it concluded that the "dumping of toxic and harmful waste is rampant in the sea, on the shores and in the hinterland".

A year later the Somali multi-clan NGO Daryeel Bulsho Guud conducted its own survey. With greater local co-operation, it was able to identify 15 containers of "confirmed nuclear and chemical wastes" in eight coastal areas.

At the same time, the UN and World Bank put together a joint Needs Assessment (JNA) to plan for Somalia's return to functioning nationhood. Updated in 2008, it recommends US\$42.1 million be set aside for environmental activities, including ensuring all "toxic waste [is] found and removed". It doesn't address the cost of human suffering, however, and ignores the fact that the dumping of toxic waste in Somalia continues to this day.

Field research in Somalia by Zainab Hassan, a former fellow at the University of Minnesota and Environmental Justice Advocate, has brought to light a whole range of chronic and acute illnesses suffered by Somalis.

These include severe birth defects, such as the absence of limbs, and widespread cancers. One local doctor said he had treated more cases of cancer in one year than he had in his entire professional career before the tsunami.

"Firms are illegally dumping hazardous and nuclear waste," says Zainab Hassan. "The international community should do something in terms of cleaning up, and those responsible should be brought to justice."

EcoTerra, an NGO with strong connections within Somalia, agrees, though it refuses to name the companies involved or their countries of origin. Possibly with one eye upon the assassination of Ilaria Alpi, it describes the situation as "deadly".

The UN's Special Representative for the region, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, is similarly sensitive. He confirms that dumping continues on the Somali coast, likening the situation to the shipping of blood diamonds from Liberia and Sierra Leone. His office refuses to name which NGOs he's asked to investigate the issue, however, presumably for their own protection, or the companies suspected of being involved.

Bringing those responsible for the dumping to justice may be hard. Under EU regulations 259/93 and 92/3/Euratom, the originating country is responsible for disposing of its medical and nuclear waste, as well as for its retrieval if it is disposed of illegally.

With many of the containers unmarked and much of the paperwork probably long since lost or destroyed, however, it will take a lot to enable any legal action to take place.

In addition, a UNDP source described the search for hazardous material in Somalia as like looking for a needle in a haystack. It's not that they don't know it's there, he says, but that they don't know where to start looking for it.

This makes it all the more urgent that stability return to the country. Only then will the dumping stop and the clean-up commence. □□□

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