

NOTE

Of Basel and Waste

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Lutfiyah Hanim write :**

A meeting of the Basel Convention on hazardous wastes was told of the continuing transfer of wastes to developing countries, including the export of used condoms to Indonesia and electronic wastes dumped in China and Nigeria inside equipment such as computers and cell phones.

The ninth meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP 9) to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal began on June 23 and ended on June 27 in Bali, Indonesia. Like many multilateral environment agreements, the Convention faces problems including lack of funding, implementation, and inadequate capacity among developing countries to tackle hazardous wastes.

The Basel Convention was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1992. It was created in response to the outrage of developing countries over dumping of toxic wastes and hazardous wastes into their countries under the guise of trade and sometimes materials for recycling. It is ratified by 170 countries. The US has not ratified it.

The Basel Convention addresses management, disposal and trans-boundary movement of hazardous waste. Its guiding principles are: waste should be reduced to a minimum; managed in an environmentally sound manner; be treated and disposed of as close as possible to their source of generation; and be minimized at the source.

A film by the Basel Action Network that was screened for participants showed how electronic waste (e-waste) is being dumped into countries like China and Nigeria in the guise of equipment (particularly computers and cell phones) to be reused. Some parties say that the export of used e-products into Nigeria is a way to address the digital divide and to provide more jobs for the people. In reality, a lot of these items are useless and end up in waste lots and burned, creating toxic fumes that can also pollute the water system.

John Njoroge Michuki, the Kenyan Minister of the Environment reminded the participants of the waste dumping incident in Cote d'Ivoire in 2006. A ship named Probo Koala, owned by Trafigura, a Netherlands-based company, sailing from Europe, dumped toxic chemical wastes at Abidjan. Three people died and around 1,500 were hospitalized after breathing the toxic fumes. Ironically, nothing could be done for the victims because there was no information available on which drugs were required.

The Netherlands refused to accept back the waste, due to their toxicity and the cost of clean-up. The government of Cote d'Ivoire had to use its own funds to pay a private company for the retrieval, shipment and processing of the toxic waste in France. The cost was estimated to be US\$30 million.

Many developing countries, particularly the African Group, did not sign or ratify it. But some 88 countries banned the import of hazardous waste through national laws or regional agreements. Some developed countries such as Norway,

Sweden and Denmark pushed for a global ban. Thus, Decision III/1 was adopted and Decision IV/7 appealed to countries to ratify it.

At present, 63 countries have ratified the Basel Ban amendment (62 are required for it to enter into force) but it is not implemented because there is ambiguity as to the interpretation of its Article on ratification.

The newly-elected Executive Secretary of the Basel Convention, Katharina Kummer Peiry, said that COP 9 is crucially placed to take fundamental decisions to reposition the Convention so that waste management issues are integrated into policy decisions linked to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). □□□