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Toxic shock: how the West used Somalia as a dump

Canberra Times

8 April 2005

P. 11

The not-in-my-backyard syndrome is a well established modern phenomenon. Local activists rail against plans for wind farms near Queanbeyan or a proposed waste dump outside Mildura in Victoria. This is understandable. People want today's lifestyle benefits, without suffering the impact of technology's sewage. Our desire to push the unpleasant by-products of modern living out of sight can have extreme consequences. A recent United Nations assessment of the environmental cost from the Boxing Day tsunami makes this depressingly clear. Wealthy developed countries, which produce around 90 per cent of the world's hazardous waste, have adopted some innovative policies for getting rid of their unwanted detritus. Dump the problem in the Third World. Somalia, on the east coast of Africa, seems a long way from our backyard. The country has been suspended in a state of anarchy for almost 15 years, earning the miserable honour of being the exemplar "failed state".

An abortive military humanitarian mission in the early 1990s failed to relieve the long-term suffering of the Somali people. The typical functions of government — policing, social services, regulating the movement of goods and people, controlling air space and the coastline, representing the population in international bodies — are all absent in Somalia. As one of the last countries hit by massive waves generated nearly 6000km away, the backwash has exposed a cruel legacy of Western indifference along the Somali coastline that will outlast the destruction wrought by the tsunami.

Rumours have long circulated about European companies taking advantage of the chaos in Somalia to strike dodgy deals with local warlords for "permission" to dump toxic waste in the country. The money, sometimes millions of dollars, inevitably helps to finance the ongoing conflict. But another powerful economic incentive drives this mischief. Even after shipment expenses, it is a hundred times cheaper to abandon the problem in Somalia rather than disposing of the waste properly. And, following the corporate downsizing model, some companies removed middle management altogether. They simply sunk barrel loads of awful pollutants off the Somali coast. Not even a pretend authority was there to stop them. Radioactive uranium, lead, cadmium, mercury, industrial, hospital, chemical, leather treatment and other toxic waste all dropped to the ocean floor. Until the Boxing Day tsunami churned them up and scattered these deadly containers along 650km of affected shore. The UN report notes that "Somalia has suffered triple disasters". Four years of successive drought displaced many people. Then massive livestock losses followed the drought and periodic floods. Finally, the tsunami left an estimated 300 dead, destroyed roads and fishing gear, submerged water wells and spread the deadly contaminants from the industrialised world's opportunistic waste dumping. Results of this exposure will "cause serious long-term effects on human health", says the report, not just in Somalia but around the east-African region. The impact recalls the devastating features of a chemical war.

"The health problems include acute respiratory infections, dry heavy coughing and mouth bleeding, abdominal hemorrhages, unusual skin chemical reactions, and sudden death after inhaling toxic materials." Establishing a direct relationship between the dumping and these reported effects is impossible. The lack of security in the country prohibits a full and proper investigation. It is even unclear if the illicit dumping still continues today. Before the "war on terror" became the lens for judging international crimes, heavily armed foreign vessels regularly scoured the waters off Somalia, robbing locals of precious fishing stocks, even as other ships came to jettison their poisonous cargo. Now, the United States navy actively patrols the area to limit Somalia's attractiveness as a terrorist sanctuary. The dumpers may have been inadvertently

scared off. Yet the terrible consequences of this practice remain. There are few prospects for a successful clean-up, again because general instability is an endemic problem. A Somali government in-waiting has assembled in neighbouring Kenya. Demands for regional peacekeepers to disarm the warlords and enforce order has only caused more conflict, with parliamentarians brawling, hurling chairs and beating one another with sticks. The local people are left to suffer yet another disaster. Last month, Tony Blair's Labour Government in Britain released the findings of a development commission for Africa. The report, entitled "Our Common Interest", serves an essential reminder of the penalty paid by international neglect.

It cites an estimate that \$1.5 billion might have prevented Somalia's slide into anarchy, compared with the \$7.3 billion spent during the intervention. Add to that the future cost of recovering from this latest environmental catastrophe. Toxic waste in Somalia is an international problem. Australians, with their welcome philanthropy after the Boxing Day tsunami, might be further moved to do something outside the backyard.

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