

Times Online (UK): Big profits from a very dirty business encourages corruption

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Many parts of Africa have become little more than rubbish dumps for the growing waste of Western countries.

Lawless Somalia was one of the first. As it descended into chaos in the 1990s after the overthrow of the Cold War dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, Italian multinational companies dumped nuclear and other hazardous waste there.

During heavy floods it reportedly seeped into the water table and was later blamed for depleted fish stocks — a reason often cited by Somalis for moving into piracy. “Pirates in Somalia are seen almost as Robin Hood figures, taking from the West in return for the harm it is doing,” said Abdirahman Aden Ibrahim, a Somali political analyst.

A dumping incident in Ivory Coast in 2006 has led to what will be Britain’s largest group action, brought by 30,000 Africans. They blame a multinational oil company, Trafigura, for serious health problems caused by toxic waste. Trafigura have denied the claims and say it was an independent contractor that dumped the waste without their knowledge.

After an international outcry, the company paid £110 million towards a clean-up organised by the United Nations Environment Programme. It emerged that waste had been dumped at night at a site in Abidjan, the country’s commercial capital, and found its way into a lagoon and the sewerage system.

Nick Nuttall, a spokesman for the programme, told *The Times*: “There are laws and regulations governing the export, transit and trafficking of toxic waste, but unfortunately these rules are being flouted by unscrupulous individuals and companies at the expense of poor people’s health and lives.”

He said that well-intentioned citizens in Britain and other developed countries often donated old computers, thinking that they were helping poor people in the developing world.

“Too often these machines are defunct and useless and end up increasing pollution after being dumped in landfills from Lagos to Nairobi, where toxic metal and chemicals can leak out, poisoning soils and rivers,” Mr Nuttall said. He cited studies from Nigeria which found that a minimum of 100,000 computers a month are entering the port of Lagos alone. “Local experts estimate up to 75 per cent of these items, including old TVs, CPUs and phones, are defunct — in other words, e-waste, in other words, long-distance dumping from developed-country consumers and companies to an African rubbish tip,” Mr Nuttall said.

Activists added that lax security, poor management and corruption at Africa’s ports made it easy for criminals to smuggle in hazardous and chemical waste banned under international treaties.