

Waste Dumping off Somali Coast May Have Links to Mafia, Somali Warlords

By Alisha Ryu
Nairobi
15 March 2005

[Ryu report - Download 717k](#) 

[Ryu report](#) 

Late last month, a U.N. report highlighted some serious health problems plaguing people in northern Somalia in the Horn of Africa. The problems came to light in early January after a massive tsunami from Asia brought to shore broken hazardous waste containers, which may have been dumped off the coast of Somalia for more than a decade. Allegations of waste dumping by European companies have existed for years.

The tsunami that hit the coast of Somalia in late December did more than level villages and kill hundreds of people. It also churned up a secret that some must have hoped would remain forever buried at sea.

Nick Nuttall of the U.N. Environment Program in Nairobi explains that as the wave receded, residents living along Somalia's northern coast noticed dozens of rusting steel drums, barrels, and other containers deposited on their beaches.

Smashed open by the force of the wave, Mr. Nuttall says the containers exposed a frightening activity that has been going on for more than a decade.

"Somalia has been used as a dumping ground for hazardous waste starting about the early 1990s and continuing through the civil war there," he noted. "European companies found it to be very cheap to get rid of waste there, costing as little as \$2.50 a ton where disposal costs in Europe are something like \$250 a ton. And the waste is many different kinds. There is uranium radioactive waste. There is leads. There is heavy metals like cadmium and mercury. There is industrial waste and there is hospital wastes, chemical wastes. You name it," said Mr. Nuttall.

Since the containers came ashore, hundreds of local people have fallen ill, suffering from mouth and abdominal bleeding, skin infections, and other ailments.

A senior scientist with Greenpeace Research Laboratories in Great Britain, David Santillo, says while it would be difficult to prove that exposure to industrial waste is the sole cause of such health problems, he believes there is a link.

"It could well be that some of those health effects are a result of exposure to radioactive material and in that case, for some people, regrettably, the prognosis could be very devastating," he explained. "There could be people who simply would not recover."

Warnings about a potential health and environmental disaster from illegal waste dumping began circulating as early as 1992, a year after a coalition of Somali warlords overthrew the government of dictator Mohammed Siad Barre and turned the country into a violent, lawless state.

At the time, a UNEP official in Nairobi, Mustafa Kamal Tolba, told reporters that he was convinced that European firms were dumping hazardous waste in Somalia because there was no government to stop such activities. But Mr. Tolba declined to name the companies.



Somali men walk past unidentified garbage washed on to the beach in Hafun in north eastern Somalia

AP Photo

A Brussels-based Somali environmental activist, Amina Mohammed, tells VOA that an Italian television journalist named Ilaria Alpi soon took up the investigation. But in 1994, Ms. Alpi and her cameraman were killed while traveling in Somalia.

Ms. Mohammed says she believes the journalist was assassinated.

"She was killed because there were many things that she discovered," he explained. "There are Italian companies. There is the Mafia. There are Somali warlords. There is a whole range of people, dealers, and brokers involved in this task."

Ms. Mohammed says the journalist had been investigating allegations that Mafia-run companies in Italy were regularly transporting industrial waste to Somalia for dumping. The organized crime group is estimated to control about 30 percent of Italy's waste disposal companies, including those that deal with toxic waste.

Ms. Mohammed says Ms. Alpi discovered that much of the waste was being carried from Italy to its former colony aboard fishing vessels belonging to a company called the Somali High Sea Fishing Company.

"This company was owned by the Somali government and it is now in the hands of a manager who is also presently a member of parliament," she added. "His name is Munye Said Omar. He is presently in Yemen and all the boats are in Yemen harbor."

Ms. Mohammed says the television journalist had evidence proving that the warlord was using some of the money generated from waste dumping to purchase arms to fuel the country's civil war.

In 1998, one of Italy's largest weekly magazines, *Famiglia Cristiana*, alleged that although most of the waste dumping took place after the start of the civil war in 1991, the activity actually began as early as 1989 under the former regime.

It is not known whether illegal dumping is still taking place in Somalia. The Bahrain-based, multi-national maritime force patrolling the waters off the Horn of Africa as part of a U.S.-led counter-terrorism effort, tells VOA that it has not observed any such activity in recent years.

Even so, Greenpeace scientist David Santillo says the tsunami disaster has shown that the dumping problem in Somalia deserves urgent, global attention.

"There is quite a lot that can be done, with the expertise, with the equipment that may not be available immediately to Somalia but would be available if there was a real international effort to survey the areas where this dumping is supposed to have happened and to try, as far as possible, to recover those materials, so that they are not a time bomb for the future," he noted.

Environmentalists say another urgent need is for a central government in Somalia, which can take responsibility for safeguarding its long coastline, but that may be years away.

In October, a transitional government for Somalia was cobbled together in neighboring Kenya. But its leaders have not been able to move to the Somali capital, Mogadishu, because of security threats.