

## The Same People Always Get Dumped On

It was revolting, monstrous, inhumane – and scarcely different from what happens in Africa almost every day. The oil trading company Trafigura last month agreed to pay compensation to 31,000 people in Ivory Coast, after *The Guardian* and BBC's *Newsnight* obtained emails sent by its traders. They revealed that Trafigura knew that the oil slops<sup>1</sup> it sent there in 2006 were contaminated with toxic waste. But the Ivorian contractor it employed to pump out the hold of its tanker, dumped them around inhabited areas in the capital city and the countryside. Tens of thousands of people fell ill and 15 died. While the settlement says that the slops could at worst have caused a range of short-term, low-level, flu-like symptoms, and anxiety, it is one of the world's worst cases of chemical exposure since the gas leak<sup>2</sup> at the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal. But in all other respects the Trafigura case is unremarkable, just another instance of the rich world's fly-tipping.

On the day that *The Guardian* published the company's emails, it also carried<sup>3</sup> a story about a shipwreck discovered in 480 metres of water off the Italian coast. Detectives found it after a tip-off<sup>4</sup> from a Mafioso. It appears to have been carrying drums of nuclear waste when the mafia used explosives to scuttle<sup>5</sup> it. The informant, Francesco Fonti, said his clan had been paid £100,000 (\$159,000) to get rid of it. The waste appears to be Norwegian: Norway is famous for its tough environmental laws, but a shipload of nuclear waste doesn't go missing without someone high up looking the other way<sup>6</sup>.

Italian prosecutors are investigating the scuttling of 41 more ships. But most of them weren't sunk off the coast of Italy; they were lost off the coast of Somalia. When the great tsunami of 2004 struck, it dumped and smashed open thousands of barrels on the beaches and in villages up to 10 km inland. According to the UN, they contained clinical waste from western hospitals, heavy metal, chemical junk and nuclear waste. People started suffering from unusual skin infections, bleeding at the mouth, acute respiratory infections and abdominal haemorrhages. The barrels had been dumped in the sea, a UN spokesman said, for an obvious reason: it cost European companies \$2.50 a tonne to dispose of the waste this way, while dealing with it properly would have cost 'something like \$1,000 a tonne'. On the seabed off Somalia lies Europe's picture of Dorian Gray<sup>7</sup>: the skeleton in the closet of the languid new world we have made.

The only people who have sought physically to stop this dumping are Somali pirates. Most take to the seas only for blood and booty, but some have formed coastal patrols to prevent over-fishing and illegal dumping by foreign fleets. Some of the vessels being protected from pirates by Combined Task Force 151, the rich world's policing operation in the Gulf of Aden, have come to fish illegally or dump toxic waste. The warships make no attempt to stop them. The law couldn't be clearer: the Basel convention, supported by European directives, forbids European Union or OECD nations from dumping hazardous wastes in poorer countries. But without enforcement, the law is useless.

George Monbiot, *The Guardian Weekly*, October 02, 2009

1. **slops:** waste.
2. **gas leak:** escape of gas.
3. **carried:** (here) printed.
4. **Detectives... tip-off:** police detectives discovered it after someone had informed them, told them about it.
5. **scuttle:** destroy.

6. **looking the other way:** deliberately ignoring it.
7. **Dorian Gray:** protagonist of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the novel Gray wishes that he would never get old whilst a portrait made of him when he was young gets older

in his place. The comparison here is that Gray hid his portrait upstairs in a room where no-one would ever see it, Europe does the same with its waste the author argues.

## ► Understanding the text

### 1 Answer these questions.

1. What did the emails reveal about the activities of the Trafigura oil company?
2. What did the Ivorian contractor do that was so dangerous?
3. What damage to the population did the report say that the oil slops could have caused?
4. On the same day what else did *The Guardian* report?
5. Where did the waste come from this time?
6. Where else in the world does the Mafia 'scuttle' ships?
7. What did the UN report say was contained in the barrels found during the tsunami? Which health problems did this cause?
8. Who are the only people helping in the war against illegal dumping in Somalia? Is this surprising?

## ► Beyond the text

- 2 Why do European companies favour illegal dumping? What does the Basel Convention state on this subject?
- 3 Look again at the extract from *Gomorra* that you studied. How does it help your understanding of this extract? Explain it in your own words.