American industry is desperately seeking places to dump hazardous waste and household garbage. A reporter for the CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR’s bureau in Sydney, Australia, phoned recently to inquire what we knew about the toxicity of leachate from municipal dumps. (We faxed him RHWN #90, “Leachate from Municipal Dumps has Same Toxicity as Leachate from Hazardous Waste Dumps.”). He was investigating a promoter named Dan Fleming, who is angling to sign a contract with natives of the Marshall Islands, where Mr. Fleming hopes to dump 10% of all the household garbage produced on the U.S. West Coast. Mr. Fleming says his scheme will “create new land” in the Marshalls. Mr. Fleming says if the Marshalls don’t increase their altitude by heaping on the garbage, they’ll disappear beneath the sea, victims of the greenhouse effect.

The last time the U.S. undertook largescale experiments in the Marshalls, it had ill effects on the land: we tested the H-bomb on Bikini atoll, which promptly disappeared, leaving behind a legacy of cancer and misery that the Marshall Islanders (and many unsuspecting U.S. Navy men) are still enduring. So far as we know, the only environmental group tracking this latest scam is Greenpeace; they wrote about it in GREENPEACE MAGAZINE March/April, 1989, pg. 5. The magazine is yours six times a year for a donation of $20 to Greenpeace, 1436 U Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009.

As the price of hazardous waste disposal in the “civilized world” is approaching $2500 per ton in some areas, a new “profession” has emerged: international “waste merchants,” who arrange to dump the stuff in third world countries. In the last two years, Africa has emerged as the favored target. Consider these facts:

In March, 1988, a Norwegian ship dumped 15,000 tons of material labeled “raw material for bricks” in a quarry on Kassa Island, off the mainland capital of Conakry, Guinea. Guinea is a small west-African country bordered by Sierra Leone, Liberia and Mali. In June, Guinea newspapers reported that vegetation on the island was drying up and dying. Investigations revealed that the “raw material for bricks” was toxic incinerator ash from Philadelphia’s now-infamous garbage burners. Norway’s Honorary Consul, Mr. Sigmund Stromme, was arrested and charged with forging documents in order to bring in the shipment; Mr. Stromme turned out to be a principal in Guinomar, the company that had a contract to bring in a total of 85,000 tons of Philadelphia’s ash. By July the original shipment had been removed from Kassa.

On February 9, 1989, Guinea-Bissau, a west-African neighbor of Guinea, signed a five-year contract with two British companies to receive 15 million tons of tanning and pharmaceutical wastes for a payment of $600 million ($40 per ton). The wastes would come from U.S. and European firms. (This contract has since been canceled due to unfavorable publicity.)

An undetermined quantity of hazardous wastes from U.S. military agencies was dumped in a phosphate mine pit in Zimbabwe in southern Africa. The U.S. exporters responsible, Jack and Charles Colbert, were sentenced in February, 1988, to 13 years’ imprisonment for fraudulent business practices.

WEST AFRICA HOTLINE, a newsletter, reports that President Bongo of Gabon (bordering Cameroon and the Congo) met with representatives of the Denis Mining Company in 1987 and agreed to take radioactive mine wastes from Colorado uranium mines.

A report in ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, a journal of the American Chemical Society, quotes Greenpeace saying a Dutch shipping company signed a contract with the government of the Congo (bordering Zaire and Cameroon) to deliver a million tons of solution paint, pesticide sludge, and chemical wastes from the U.S. and Europe between June, 1988, and May, 1989, for a fee of $84 million ($84 per ton). Bad publicity subsequently queered this deal too.

President Kerekou of Benin, a tiny country sandwiched between Nigeria and Togo, signed a contract in January, 1988, with a Gibraltar firm, Sesco, Ltd, agreeing that Benin will take up to five million tons per year of non-nuclear industrial wastes from North America and Europe. The price? Two dollars and fifty cents per ton.

Nigeria has taken the lead in denouncing waste dumping in Africa. At the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit in May, 1988, President Babangida of Nigeria said “No government, no matter the financial inducement, has the right to mortgage the destiny of future generations of African children.”

Ironically, within a week of President Babangida’s speech, eight Nigerian students living in Italy, reacting to reports in Italian newspapers, alerted the Nigerian government to a scheme involving collusion between Nigerian and Italian businessmen. The men had shipped 3800 tons of hazardous wastes and stored them in Koko, Nigeria. The chief Italian suspect escaped from Nigeria June 2, but 15 Nigerians are awaiting trial. The newspapers in Nigeria June 14 carried headlines, “Culprits may face firing squad,” and “Death penalty likely.”

Greenpeace is publishing a newsletter called GREENPEACE WASTE TRADE UPDATE. With the Natural Resources Defense Council, Greenpeace has joined organizations in Malaysia and Kenya founding Itwan, the International Toxic Waste Action Network, working closely with the United Nations, pressuring for passage of the U.N.’s “Global Convention on the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes.” Once again, hats off to the toxics campaigners at Greenpeace! Contact them at 1436 U Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009; phone (202) 462-1177.”

--Peter Montague

Descriptor terms: international waste trade; greenpeace; africa; marshall islands; pacific rim; guinea; ash; philadelphia; pa; guinea-bissau; zimbabwe; gabon; uranium; mine wastes; mining; congo; benin; nigeria; togo; malaysia; kenya; united nations; treaties; developing countries; health effects; radioactive waste; native people; nuclear weapons;