

# The Third World

## Dumping Ground for the West

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“To give food aid to a country just because they are starving is a pretty weak reason.”

—Henry Kissinger

Months before the United States sent troops to Somalia to supposedly protect food supply lines from the pilferage of “evil warlords,” Italy was completing arrangements to ship its toxic wastes to Somalia, with nary a protest from the U.S.

By early September, Italian companies were almost finished building two incinerators to be installed in Somalia that would handle at least two 550,000-ton shipments of toxic waste next year for an estimated profit of \$4 million to \$6 million. The United Nations top environmental officer, Mostafa Tolba, said the dumping could aggravate the destruction of Somalia’s ecosystem and threaten further loss of life in the ravaged nation.

“Africa,” writes Silvia Federici, professor at Hofstra University and editor of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa’s newsletter, “is being turned into the chemical/nuclear dust-bin of the world, the region where expired pharmaceutical products, toxic wastes, and materials banned in other countries, from medicines to pesticides, are dumped.”

In 1992 alone, industrial countries exported over 74,000 tons of toxic wastes to a dozen “less-developed” regions, including the African continent. If all goes according to current U.S. government plans, those wastes would be but the first wave of a national flood of global waste dumping amounting to tens of millions of tons each year.

Much of the toxic waste generated in the U.S. cannot be legally buried in landfills because of environmental victories won over the last twenty years. It can cost waste producers as much as \$2,000 per ton to legally dispose of liquid wastes; this leads to profits of tens of billions of dollars for traffickers of the wasteberg, rivaling profits from the drug trade.

So, instead of detoxifying their wastes, many companies ship them abroad to be dumped, at only a fraction of the economic cost. American Cyanamid, for example, a huge corporation headquartered in New Jersey, ships thousands of tons of mercury wastes to its facility in South Africa, which then dumps the deadly compounds directly into a river—with the approval of the South African government.

Mercury, which is present in most waste shipments, is a lethal poison with brutal effects on the nervous system, even in very low concentrations. Mercury poisoning causes severe neurological disorders, deafness, mental deterioration and death. Scores of South African people living downstream from the dumping have already died from it; drinking water and agriculture have been drastically compromised.

But a few years ago, Africans began what would become an international outcry against toxic and nuclear waste dumping. To regain the propaganda value inherent in claiming the moral imperative, and to bypass newly-signed treaties, virtually every recent waste trade scheme now claims some form of socially redeeming purpose. U.S. regulations allow toxic wastes to be mixed in with agricultural chemicals; because they’re considered “inert” elements there’s no need to list them.

Consequently, thousands of tons of U.S. toxic wastes, deceptively labeled “fertilizer,” have been scattered on farms and beaches from Bangladesh to Haiti. Even “the Green word ‘recycling’ is used now as a license to dump all kinds of dangerous wastes in my country and around the world,” says Marijane Lisboa of Greenpeace Brazil; and, in this Mad Hatter tea party world, recycling, re-use, and other “humanitarian” benefits accrue to the recipient country.

Eyeing Somalia, Guatemala and other poor client-states of the U.S. as potential dump sites, the U.S. government has taken the lead in blocking a proposal by many so-called “developing” countries that would prohibit all toxic waste exports from 24 industrial countries to the rest of the world. But few in the U.S. have yet to heed the warnings of ecologically-minded anti-war activists that the U.S. and other industrial countries are growing increasingly restive over finding places sufficiently pacified in which to dump their toxic wastes. They need to do this to lower their costs and increase profits, and are increasingly willing to take military action to secure sites in poor countries.

In addition to its reports on the Italian incinerator project, the Associated Press has obtained a copy of a document that “shows a 20-year commitment, signed on December 5, 1991, by Nur Elmy Osman, the ‘health minister’ of [current Somalia president] Ali Mandi Mohamed, to allow Acher Partners to build an incinerator near Mogadishu and discusses building a landfill to hold as much as 11 million tons of the industrial and hospital ‘treated’ waste, including solid and liquid waste of the toxic type.”

Although the reasons for U.S. military presence in Somalia are multifaceted, the need of Europe, Japan, Russia and the U.S. to dump the wastes of industrial production somewhere must certainly be considered among the important factors, especially considering opposition to toxic dumping and incinerators in the home regions.

Other factors, generally unreported in the corporate press, include: the enlargement of U.S. military bases to patrol Somalia’s 1,700 miles of strategically vital coastline along the outlet from the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean’s oil-tanker routes; tapping into Somalia’s mineral reserves (especially uranium, but also bauxite, iron, tin and gypsum); hammering an ever-cheaper and dispensable workforce into existence; and creating the ability to militarily attack nearby forces that might challenge the interests of U.S. capital in the region—particularly the recently successful Eritrean victory, the Somali National Movement in the north, and nationalist forces in Kenya (which are beginning to threaten the existence of U.S. bases there)—as well as protecting U.S. dominance in competition with European and Japanese capital.

## **The Internationalization of Labor**

Much of Somalia’s economic life is organized around the growth and export of cattle (traditionally camel meat, although that is changing), which utilizes the large pastoral spreads provided by nature in that region, along with sugar, sorghum, bananas, corn, gum and incense. Although the vastly different natural landscapes, social and economic arrangements, and deposits of natural resources throughout Africa make it inappropriate to extend certain generalizations about the continent to individual African societies, the policies of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and international capital—such as the forced development of export crops, even though that destroys local self-sufficiency and dispossesses small-plot farming, concentrating the ownership of land in fewer and fewer hands—are becoming a universalizing force on the continent.

Much of the Somalis’ income came from relatives working the oil fields in Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The reconfiguration of the working class in the Persian Gulf following the 1991 war—Kuwait and Saudi Arabia forcibly replaced Palestinian, Arab and African workers with cheaper, less class-organized labor from southern Asia—has cost Somalia around \$300 million a year. Somalia, which is slightly smaller than Texas in geographic area, now owes \$2 billion to Western banks.

As investigative journalist Andy Pollack states, “The reporting on the social consequences of IMF and World Bank policies has been extremely scarce. The Times, for instance, has had articles on Somalia every day for the last two months on the famine, with not one single word about its roots. It’s as if the country didn’t exist before two months ago. All of the coverage is focused on the ‘feuding clans’ and the difficulties they present to relief efforts.”

In Somalia, only in those areas around Mogadishu, the capital, Baidoa, and Kismayu, where IMF measures were able to break down the traditional structures and be fully imposed and in the town of Baardheere, do we find the kind of hunger, disease and disruption of domestic life that so powerfully stir our distant compassion.

And even there, the starvation was caused by the imposition of brutal policies via a central authority in Somalia, not by its collapse (contrary to the current U.S. government/media/liberals' line). Somalia under Barre was in as desperate straits as it is today—perhaps worse; all the misery we're called on to fight today is a direct result of U.S./IMF measures, imposed in some areas of Somalia more effectively than in others by a central governing authority that no longer exists—and which the U.S. government is terribly concerned to reestablish.

## **A1 Housing vs. B1 Bombers**

In a land where 82 percent of the people work in agriculture, Somalis have been resisting the foreign attempts to turn their lands into an enormous toxic dump site and to forcibly proletarianize their communities. That resistance, over the past decade and a half, prompted the U.S. government to arm troops loyal to now-deposed Somali dictator Siad Barre. In January, 1980, the U.S. government, under President Jimmy Carter, announced that it was seeking bases in Somalia, Oman and Kenya for U.S. ships and planes patrolling the Indian Ocean.

Doug Ireland points out in *The Village Voice*, Dec. 15, 1992, "If you read Sophronia Scott Gregory's piece [in *Time*] too quickly you might have missed...one slim paragraph: 'Washington was eager for a strategic outpost near the Arabian oil fields and struck an agreement to take over the old Soviet military facilities. For the next 10 years the U.S. poured hundreds of millions of dollars into arming the country.'" Indeed, even in the face of thousands of civilians murdered by Barre, tortures, political imprisonments, political killings, the U.S. government, the IMF, and the World Bank continued to fund his operation, just as they did in arming Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Noriega in Panama.

A recent U.S. State Department report "admitted the regime had killed at least 5,000 unarmed civilians between June 1988 and March 1989, and documented a pattern of torture against civilians involving 'severe beatings, stabbing, prolonged choking, use of metal clips and electric shock on flesh and testicles and immersion in excrement.' The report concluded that the [Barre] regime was about to disintegrate, yet [a U.S.] official commenting on the report said the port of Berbera was 'still important to our interests' because of its strategic position as a staging post for sending troops to southwest Asia."

Unfortunately, many people cling to notions of progress that entail destroying other people's "antiquated" ways of living in order to "make things better for them" and to "save them from themselves." This 20<sup>th</sup> century version of the "white man's burden" is capitalism's ideologically liberal complement; it seeks a cleaner imperialism—one hopefully without death-squads—and it launches its crusades against militant resistance by demonizing those who "just can't see the light."

So, we find American newspaper coverage of Somalia laced with terms like "warlords," "gangs," "violent bands," "chaos," "random violence"—a way of framing the situation that is accepted and regurgitated by liberals as much as by the government. This mindset was driven home by a Marine Corps colonel, Bob Agro-Melina, who described the various bands and communities in Somalia as similar to "gangs like the Bloods and the Crips in Los Angeles." He added, "To secure the area, we've got to disarm them."

Thus far, the meaningful ways in which daily life is organized in Somalia's supposedly "chaotic," decentralized traditional villages and clans have circumvented most prior attempts by international capital and colonial powers—unloved, uninvited and making no pretext of their need for a non-chaotic central authority—to impose capital's wholly unnatural rhythms on African life.



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