

WASTE TRADE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

WASTE ATTACK AGAINST LEBANON CASE 2: WASTE FROM FROM GERMANY 1993

In July 1993, businessman Ghassan Abdallah imported waste from Germany to Lebanon. The cargo was loaded in a 40-foot container and included 120 used refrigerators, 400 used compressors for fridges and 70 barrels with outdated paints. Some of the barrels were leaking.

Abdallah said he had bought the paints for 1,000 Marks from the Berlin-based company Rego GmbH. The Palestinian national said these barrels were in fact worth 15,000 Marks. He shipped the container with the Hamburg-based firm Orient Schiffahrt- und Speditionsgesellschaft GmbH on board the ship "Waalhaven".

Greenpeace gave information about this illegal case of trade with toxic waste to as-Safir, which was the first newspaper in Lebanon to report about this scandal. The media impact led to a police investigation.

The investigation report written by police officer Ali Shaer said his unit had inspected the storage site of the paints in Burj al-Barajneh, Beirut, and he had interrogated Ghassan Abdallah as well as his brother Yassir.

"We confiscated 45 barrels and took samples, and then put the barrels nearby in premises owned by Mohammad al-Khatib who we asked to lock the room with the barrels inside, and we took the keys with us," the police report said.

The other barrels were apparently stored somewhere else or sold.

Ghassan Abdallah told police: "I got in touch with the firm Rego in 1993 and met Mr Stefan Andre. I bought three tons of paints. I paid 1,000 Marks for them. Actually they were worth 15,000 Marks. The paints are from an east German factory in Leipzig... I shipped them to Lebanon with Orient Spedition GmbH on board the ship Waalhaven, which arrived in Beirut in July 1993."

"After the unification of Germany, traders were trying to get rid of products, and the owner of the products has a huge storage place with many sorts of products, mainly products he wants to get rid of," Abdallah said.

Yassir Abdallah, the brother of Ghassan Abdallah, told police: "We sold the barrels at 35 dollars a gallon... I do not believe they are toxic substances, although I cannot be completely sure. I painted my parents' house with it and my uncle's house... and no one was hurt... We sold ten gallons to a man called Mustafa Ajmal, and I think he painted his house with it."

In 1993, Lebanese Environment Minister Samir Moqbel reacted to the as-Safir article and pledged to search and punish all toxic waste dealers. "I will stop the import of toxic chemicals and will follow the criminals to their grave," he told as-Safir (26.10.1993).

Greenpeace Mediterranean Office members Mario Damato and Fouad Hamdan in March 1994 visited Beirut and offered the Lebanese Environment Ministry to take samples from the waste. The ministry ignored the offer.

A Lebanese chemical expert tested the paints and found out that they were outdated products that could not be used, and were therefore "normal industrial waste" (as-Safir, 22.2.1995).

It is to be noted that industrial waste is in almost all cases de facto toxic, and poses a danger for the environment and for people. Ghassan Abdallah either imported the paints, fridges and compressors out of ignorance, not realizing that they posed a danger, or he acted in full knowledge that he made a lucrative illegal deal.

In March 1995, police officer Ali al-Shaer told Lebanese State Prosecutor Said Mirza that the barrels with paints owned by Ghassan Abdallah had been found in the southern suburbs of Beirut in Burj al-Barajneh. The barrels contained paints and not toxic waste, al-Shaer said (as-Safir 10.3.1995).

Ghassan Abdallah recently denied that he had imported toxic waste. He said police had detained him for two days in 1993. The Lebanese Environment Ministry took samples of the paints and tested them at the American University of Beirut, he claimed. "Test results showed that the paints were fine. The proof is that I was released," he said. "After this incident I stopped trading in paints. I now concentrate on trading with used fridges, carpets and clothing" (an-Nahar 17.1.1995).

Reliable sources in Beirut, who gave Greenpeace the copy of the police report (see appendix), said that samples taken by the police could not be tested because there were no laboratories in Lebanon capable of testing them. The case was then closed because a crime could not be proven, the sources told Greenpeace.

In Germany, the Environment Authority in Hamburg contacted Mr Schawe, the director of "Orient Schiffahrts- and Speditionsgesellschaft (Orient Shipping and Transport Company)" in 1993. Schawe said his company had transported the 40-foot container from Berlin via Hamburg to Beirut in July 1993. The customer was Mr Ghassan Abdallah.

"According to the bill of lading and written contracts, the deal mentions only outdated fridges and compressors. But in addition, container No. UGAU 401 175-1 of Mr Abdallah was loaded with 70 barrels of whitewash (paint with lime). This happened, Mr Schawe stressed, without the knowledge of the shipping company, and it was discovered by customs officials at the port of destination in Beirut," the Environment Authority said in a letter to the Environment Ministry in Bonn in 1993 (see copy of letter in appendix).

"The whole shipment was objectively waste in accordance with Article 1, Waste Law, that is the outdated paints as well as the used fridges and compressors... Mr Abdallah is obliged to get rid of the waste in a legal way... The Orient- und Speditionsgesellschaft, according to Mr. Schawe, has regularly transported used fridges and old tires for Mr Abdallah," the letter said.

The "bill of lading" (see appendix) mentions only the used compressors and fridges and not the outdated paints.

The location of the waste is unknown. It may have been sold in Lebanon as paint, as Ghassan Abdallah claimed in an interview (an-Nahar 17.1.1995). Or it could have been dumped somewhere.

This case shows that the export of toxic waste from OECD-countries to non-OECD countries is still possible as long as the 1994 Basel Convention decision (II/12) is not ratified by the rich industrial nations. The accord envisages a total ban of waste export from OECD-countries to non-OECD countries starting 1.1.1988.

Greenpeace urges Lebanese authorities to search for the waste and, if found, ask the German government to take it back.

SOURCES:

Own research
Greenpeace, Waste Trade in the Mediterranean, 1993
As-Safir and an-Nahar articles, 1993, 1994, 1995

APPENDIX:

1. Bill of lading for the 40-foot container, 10.7.1993 (in English).
2. Letter from the Hamburg Environment Authority to the German Environment Ministry in Bonn, 19.11.1993 (in German)
3. Translation of parts of this letter into English
4. Lebanese police investigation report, 23.11.1993 (in Arabic).
5. Translation in parts of the police report into English.

Fouad Hamdan

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