

TOXIC ATTACK AGAINST LEBANON

CASE ONE: TOXIC WASTE FROM ITALY

CHRONOLOGY 1987-1997

April 1975: Start of the civil war in Lebanon. Beirut port is under military control of the right-wing Phalangist militia, later named "Lebanese Forces".

TOXIC ATTACK

September 21, 1987: The ship "Radhost" enters Beirut port transporting a cargo of industrial, highly toxic waste from Italy. 15,800 barrels of different sizes and 20 containers are unloaded. Militiamen from the "Lebanese Forces" cover up the entry of the waste, bribed by a share of money the Italian company "Jelly Wax" pays to "Arman Nassar Shipping", the Lebanese importer of the ship's cargo. An employee of the shipping company signs a document declaring the waste as "raw material for industrial production and for agriculture", thus disguising it.

October 1987-Spring 1988: In Lebanon, waste barrels are sold as raw material to factories. Some of the toxic waste is used as fertilizers, pesticides and paints. Barrels are emptied, repainted so as to hide their origin, and sold to be reused. People use them out of ignorance to store food and drinking water. Waste barrels are burnt or emptied and their contents dumped into several areas like Halat and the quarry of Shnanir, east of Junieh. Other storage sites in Jeita and Zuk Mosbeh are also contaminated. Hundreds of barrels are dumped in the Mediterranean Sea. Some 2,000 barrels end in the waste dump of Burj-Hammud north of Beirut.

June 1988: Lebanese media uncover the deal. Following a public outcry and pressure from Lebanese Prime Minister Salim Hoss, Italy promises to take back all waste and to finance the operation.

July 1988: Prime Minister Hoss informs parliament that the waste from Italy was very toxic and endangered the country. "Lebanese Forces" member César Nasr, responsible for the militia's foreign relations, claims that most of the chemicals could be recycled. A committee of Italian and Lebanese scientists samples the waste and ranks it as 100% toxic. Outdated solvents and paints, waste from chemical laboratories, outdated medication, oil residues, sand mixed with dioxin possibly from the town of Seveso (where a fire in a factory had caused heavy pollution), heavy metals, explosive and carcinogenic substances are found.

ITALY DECEIVES LEBANON

August 1988: Italian experts arrive in Lebanon to supervise the transfer of the waste to Italy. The content of 5,500 partly rusty and leaking barrels is emptied in the vicinity of Beirut Port and mixed with sand and lime, polluting ground, water, and air, thus jeopardizing the health of the workers. Many are crushed by heavy machinery. The toxics are stored in some 10,000 new barrels. The barrels are loaded into at least four ships, the "Jolly Rosso", "Cunski", "Voriais Sporadais", and "Yvonne A". Apart from the "Jolly Rosso", none of the ships ever reach Italy. The three other vessels probably dumped their cargo in the Mediterranean Sea. Several barrels are washed ashore on the Lebanese coast.

September 1988: Italian government officials go to court to force at least 22 waste producers and brokers to turn over 75 million dollars to meet the cost of transporting and treating incoming Italian waste from countries like Nigeria and Lebanon. "Jelly Wax" managing director Renato Pent responded indignantly to the lawsuit, insisting that his firm's exports to Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey had all been authorized by officials of those countries.

Pent said: "No way we will pay. We never sent waste just like that. We have letters from ministers from Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey with the stamps of the Italian embassies allowing the discharge of waste", Pent claimed. "The Italian government should seek reparations from foreign governments that refused to honour their commitments. And if they refuse to pay, the government should take the funds from the aid money for the Third World."

January 1989: The "Jolly Rosso" leaves Beirut port despite protests of Lebanese authorities, demanding confirmation that all waste was being returned to Italy.

1989-1990: Final stage of the civil war in Lebanon during which no further investigation of the toxic waste scandal takes place. War ends in October 1990.

March 1992: The case is secretly reopened in Lebanon. A state prosecutor decides that those involved in the case could not face trial because their crimes were acts of war, hence covered by a general amnesty law. Two of the accused are charged only for committing minor crimes. This decision is not published.

TOXIC WASTE BARRELS APPEAR AGAIN

June 1994: 30 barrels of solid waste are discovered in the Kisrwan mountains. The waste is later stored in a container at Beirut port.

August 1994: Hundreds of inhabitants of the Kisrwan mountains prevent officials of the Lebanese Environment Ministry from dumping waste barrels in a stone quarry near a village. Without security measures, the barrels were to be dumped in close to a river. This waste is later also stored in a container at Beirut port. Two containers with toxic waste are now at Beirut Port.

GREENPEACE SAMPLES TOXIC WASTE

November 1994: The Greenpeace flagship "Rainbow Warrior" arrives in Beirut - the first visit of a Greenpeace vessel to Lebanon. Following the demand made by the Lebanese ecological group "Green Line" that the nature of the waste be determined by an independent source, Greenpeace activists take samples from the two containers stored in Beirut port.

January 1995: A Lebanese Army report leaked to the press says former members of the "Lebanese Forces", like César Nasr and Jamil Rima, had been appointed as advisors to Environment Minister Samir Moqbel to cover up the scandal.

Greenpeace publishes a report on the samples taken from the waste and analyzed: inflammable liquids, oil residues, highly toxic heavy metals and carcinogenic substances were found, suggesting that some of the toxic waste stored at Beirut Port could be part of the Italian deal. Greenpeace issues the warning that by planning to dump the water soluble substances in the aquifer region of the Kisrwan mountains, the Environment Ministry had risked to contaminate the groundwater.

THE GOVERNMENT REOPENS THE CASE

February 1995: A day after the report is released, the Lebanese government orders a high-level inquiry. The "Higher Relief Council", a ministerial body, promises to launch a search for the barrels and to remove them. The cabinet asks Lebanon's highest court for state security crimes to investigate the toxic waste scandal. The case is thus no longer solely in the hands of Environment Minister Samir Moqbel. Following harsh criticism, César Nasr, the advisor of the Environment Minister, resigns from his post.

The prosecutor appointed to investigate the case, Mr Said Mirza, issues warrants for three men suspected of dumping waste during the war and arrests two of them. However, he also orders the detention of one scientist Dr. Pierre Malychef for allegedly giving false testimony on the waste scandal. A day before his arrest, the scientist stated that toxic waste was scattered around the entire country. Following a public outrage, Dr Malychef is released.

May 1995: The Greenpeace Mediterranean Office releases the report "Toxic Attack against Lebanon. Case One: Toxic Waste from Italy". The office's Lebanon Campaigner, Fouad Hamdan, urges the Lebanese government to officially ask Italy to return the waste and to decontaminate polluted land.

Lebanese authorities refuse to cooperate with Greenpeace taking samples from sites where waste was dumped or burned. Hamdan inspects alone dumping and burning sites, and he takes samples. The Italian ambassador refuses a meeting with Hamdan. Lebanese state prosecutor Said Mirza interrogates Fouad Hamdan as "witness" for seven hours. The lawyers of two Lebanese men jailed by Mirza for involvement in the scandal file a law suit against Hamdan for "threatening Lebanon's state security and for defamation". Mirza decides to study the request.

Under pressure by Lebanese journalists during a trade fair, Italian Under-Secretary for Foreign Trade, Mr Mario D'Urso, says in Beirut: "The issue is now in the hands of the judiciary. We will execute all decisions it will take without any hesitation." Whilst such a statement indicates - for the first time - a change of attitude, it was due to diplomatic expedience and not any sincere motivations of concern. This position became necessary for Italy to take in view of the investigations being carried out by Lebanese authorities

June 1995: Environment Minister Samir Moqbel loses his job in the wake of a government reshuffle. Sources close to Prime Minister Rafik Hariri say he had made only mistakes in dealing with the issue of toxic waste.

CONFRONTATION BETWEEN GREENPEACE AND AUTHORITIES

September 1, 1995: Lebanese authorities force the Greenpeace ship "Altair" out of Beirut Port. Policemen cut the ropes of the ship, and a tugboat pushes it outside the harbour. A navy patrol vessel then escorts the "Altair" outside the 12-mile zone. Authorities wanted to prevent Greenpeace from working on the issue of toxic waste and seek to cover up the issue. Greenpeace Mediterranean Campaigner Fouad Hamdan was scheduled to publish the latest sampling test results on board the ship the same day.

The new Environment Minister, Mr Pierre Pharaon, claims the same day that the ship arrived "directly from Israel", thus violating Lebanese law. Fact is that the "Altair" came from Cyprus where its crew members took part in a non-violent action in front of the French embassy to protest nuclear testing before coming to Beirut. This action was reported by the international media. Mr Pharaon also says the toxic waste file was closed because "there is no toxic waste and no pollution in Lebanon". He bases his claim on a report written by the French company Burgeap for the Lebanese Environment Ministry.

Hamdan holds the press conference, originally scheduled on the "Altair", at the port's entrance and releases test results by the Greenpeace Research Laboratories at Exeter University (England). The tests prove that soil in the Shnanir quarry is contaminated by a cocktail of highly toxic waste: heavy metals (arsenic, zinc and lead), aromatic organic compounds, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, chlorinated substances like the highly toxic hexachlorobutadiene (HCBd), pentachlorobutadiene (PCBD) and hexachlorocyclopentadiene (HCCPD). HCCPD damages the lung and kidney. HCBd, PCBD and HCCPD are known to be carcinogens. These toxics could pollute ground waters used currently by people living in residential areas in and around Shnanir. All discovered toxics closely resemble the contents of tons of toxic waste exported by the Italian company "Jelly Wax" to Lebanon in 1987.

September 9, 1995: Greenpeace officially offers to cooperate with Lebanese authorities and to take samples under official supervision. No reaction from authorities.

September 15, 1995: Greenpeace informs Lebanese public opinion that, in another attempt to cover up the issue, work recently resumed at the Shnanir quarry despite the fact that its soil contains toxic waste. The quarry had been abandoned since 1988. Sand and rocks from the quarry were mixed with layers of toxic waste and with ashes from waste that had been burnt. These highly contaminated materials were to be used in the construction sector. The problem was then shifted from one spot to many others. People getting in touch with contaminated construction material were endangered.

September 21, 1995: Greenpeace charges that the Lebanese government deliberately misinterpreted its own sample test results to cover up the issue of toxic waste. Greenpeace studied the official data written by the French company Burgeap to the Lebanese Higher Relief Council (HRC), which is presided by Premier Rafik Hariri. The international environmental organisation reveals that Environment Minister Pierre Pharaon bluntly fooled public opinion when he claimed on September 1 that the official test results showed that "there is no pollution in Lebanon."

But Burgeap said in its report that in Shnanir, 25 kilometres northeast of Beirut, "after investigation, there is high suspicion that this site has been used to dump toxic waste from the central part down the wadi (valley). Many wells are available downstream." Burgeap included in its report a map showing that its experts took samples some 200 meters west of the main quarry which, according to Greenpeace tests, is highly contaminated by toxic waste.

In Zuq Mosbeh, 15 kilometres north of Beirut, samples tested by Burgeap proved contaminated by toxic chlorinated substances and heavy metals like manganese. Burgeap wrote to the HRC: "Most the site is asphalted: It is then of great importance to get cross-checked evidence that it was already asphalted when waste storage occurred. Neighbours' interviews and aerial photographs should be used in this purpose... Hydrogeological further investigation on this site should include comprehensive inventory of neighbouring wells."

Burgeap wrote in its report to the HRC that "most of the samples have been left to HRC to be analysed in Lebanon. A small amount of those samples, mostly doubles, has been shipped to France by HRC, in order to conduct an extensive research." Burgeap proposed the dispatching of the samples in Lebanon to three Lebanese laboratories. However, Mr Pharaon, never mentioned that many more samples were taken than the 82 tested in France. He also never said that he will order further investigations in Shnanir and Zuq Mosbeh.

The same night, Justice Minister Tabbara says Greenpeace's Fouad Hamdan would be arrested for "damaging Lebanon's image abroad and the country's tourism industry". The next day, Mr. Tabbara says that Hamdan would only be interrogated as a "witness".

September 23, 1995: Prosecutor Said Mirza interrogates Hamdan as "a witness" for three hours. Hamdan took with him to the Justice Palace a suitcase with personal belongings - for any case. After leaving the palace, Hamdan again blasts the Lebanese government for attempting to cover up the issue of toxic waste, and he reiterates Greenpeace's will to cooperate with authorities.

COOPERATION BETWEEN GREENPEACE AND AUTHORITIES

September 29, 1995: Mr. Pharaon and Hamdan hold a joint press conference during which the ministry and Greenpeace agree to cooperate in solving the toxic waste issue. Mr Pharaon officially receives from Hamdan all Greenpeace documents on this issue.

October 8, 1995: Hamdan shows Mr Pharaon, HRC Secretary-General Yehya Raad and Mr Bertrand Guerin from Burgeap two contaminated locations in the main Shnanir quarry. Mr Pharaon and General Raad promise to decontaminate the Shnanir quarry as soon as possible. They also promise to implement all recommendations written by Burgeap.

October 9, 1995: Greenpeace reveals that authorities in Lebanon are secretly collecting toxic waste barrels and contaminated land for planned incineration in Europe. The operation was carried out by the HRC and the Environment Ministry. Burgeap was supervising the secret collection and decontamination operation which was carried out on the ground by the British company "Environmental Technologies". Most of the collected waste is part of the 2,411 tonnes of toxic waste exported from Italy to Lebanon in 1987, Lebanese authorities told Greenpeace. The Lebanese tax payers are financing this operation - and not the Italian government.

According to officials documents with Greenpeace, Lebanese authorities were secretly collecting the toxics from the Lebanese towns and villages of Tripoli, Halat, Bchille, Zelhmaya, Shnanir and Azouz. Lebanese nationals involved in the scandal told authorities where they had dumped the waste in 1987/88, Greenpeace learnt.

January 1996: Lebanese Environment Minister Pierre Pharaon informs Greenpeace Mediterranean that more than 77 tons of contaminated land and toxic waste have been collected from the areas mentioned above. The toxics were stored in Beirut Port and will be shipped for planned incineration in the Tredi plant in southern France. Parts of the toxics are of Italian origin, the rest is from the Lebanese industry, Pharaon said. Greenpeace's Hamdan inspects the 12 containers at Beirut Port.

March 1996: Greenpeace Mediterranean charges that Lebanese authorities are dragging their feet to solve the toxic waste issue. Six months had passed since authorities were informed about the contaminated spots in Shnanir and all they have done was only take samples. These official test results from the Pasteur Institute, which were viewed by Greenpeace, confirmed that the two spots were contaminated by heavy metals, hydrocarbons and outdated toxic pesticides.

FIRST RESULTS

April 1996: Greenpeace revealed that the Lebanese authorities on April 4 shipped secretly to France the 12 container with 77 tons of toxic waste and contaminated land for planned incineration at the company Tredi. The toxics were shipped on board the vessel "Varna" from Beirut to Marseilles.

"The operation took place secretly and authorities reluctantly confirmed to us the shipment," said Hamdan. "Today we can say that only a small amount of the toxic waste from Italy had been retrieved and only a few polluted areas decontaminated. There is still a lot to do. We also oppose the incineration of the toxic waste in France for environmental considerations. They should be recycled if technically possible or stored safely."

Greenpeace condemned the policy of the Lebanese government to carry out the collection and decontamination operations secretly without any media or other independent control. By doing so Mr. Pharaon told past and future toxic waste traders that the Lebanese government will actively silence every criticism against such crimes. Public opinion has a right to know about every detail so that such an ecological crime is not repeated. As a matter of principle, Lebanese authorities also should have returned to Italy the toxics proved to be part of the 1987 deal.

"I asked Mr Pharaon why the Lebanese government is not officially demanding from Italy to fulfil its 1988 promise and return all the waste. He answered that the European Union, including Italy, is giving Lebanon millions in grants and aid and therefore it would be inappropriate to embarrass Italy with the toxic waste," Hamdan said.

GREENPEACE ENDS COOPERATION WITH THE AUTHORITIES:

May 1996: The Greenpeace Mediterranean Office ends eight months of "cooperation" on the issue of toxic waste with Lebanese authorities because they refused to solve the problem in a serious way, the environmental organisation said during a press conference. Mr. Pharaon and General Raad refused to decontaminate the quarry of Shnanir east of Junieh. They rejected to publish all details related to the 15,800 barrels and 20 containers imported from Italy to Lebanon in 1987. And they refused to inform public opinion about their activities to solve this issue.

"Mr. Pharaon did not keep his promises, he downplayed even the official test results, he did not seem to care about the environment and the health of the people in and around Shnanir. Greenpeace cannot trust Mr. Pharaon anymore and will not deal with him on this issue anymore because it is a waste of time," said Hamdan at a press conference in Beirut. "In the meantime a house for cows was constructed on one contaminated spot while the other is under rocks. Mr. Pharaon and the Lebanese government are responsible for any future contamination of ground waters and for any future poisoning."

NEW MINISTER TAKES OVER, PROMISES TO DECONTAMINATE SHNANIR

November 1996 - till May 1997: The new Lebanese Environment Minister, Akram Shuhayeb, pledges that he will decontaminate the two spots in Shnanir after Germany returns 36 containers full of plastic waste. The first batch of 21 containers were returned in May 1997. The second batch will be shipped back to Germany in early June 1997.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE CAMPAIGN:

- Greenpeace and all environmental groups in Lebanon have succeeded in making authorities reopen the toxic waste issue, decontaminate most known areas and collect what can be found. The danger to the environment and the people of Lebanon was reduced.
- For the first time in Lebanese history authorities directly cooperated with an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), in this case Greenpeace, to solve a major ecological issue. This is a precedent.
- The public debate on the toxic waste issue has ignited an awareness among many about toxic chemicals and their impact. The Lebanese public opinion and media is today very sensitive about environmental issues.

GREENPEACE MEDITERRANEAN OFFICE

Fouad Hamdan
May 1997