Barrels of toxic waste litter the landscape outside Johannesburg.

Apartheid and the Environment:
Polluting the Poor

HEETEN KALAN

unlight may be shimmering on the sandy beaches of Durban, Nut a thick cloud seems to hang perpetually over nearby Merebank, blocking much of the South African sunshine.

The 40,000 mainly Asian and mixed-race residents of Merebank are surrounded by chemical plants spewing the noxious gases responsible for the hazy atmosphere. Two major oil refineries are situated within a mile-and-a-half radius of the community's center, while the giant Mondi Paper Co. and a chromium processing facility operate practically in the residents' backyards.

An aerial view shows that the pollution is not confined to Merebank but also affects the approximately 200,000 people living in segregated townships to the south of Durban. The same perspective also reveals that the factories' waste streams merge into a single river of filth before emptying into the Indian Ocean at a favorite fishing spot.

A 1990 health survey found that primary school children in Merebank have almost twice as much chance of acquiring coughs, colds, and Plus than does a socially and economically similar group of children 10 miles away. In another survey, 70 percent of those interviewed in Merebank complained of respiratory disorders.

Six hundred miles to the north, just outside of Johannesburg, lies an abandoned paint-manufacturing plant. No one remembers who owned the plant or why they left. What is known is that the building and the yard are strewn with barrels full of unidentified chemicals.

A visitor, already alarmed by the extent of the contamination, soon notices laundry flapping in the breeze. Mozambican refugees have settled in this lethal ruin, and their children regularly play among the barrels. What are the consequences of their exposure to the hazardous waste? No one knows.

In the northeastern Transvaal region, a cluster of villages known as Mmafefe has been badly polluted by asbestos wastes. Years of asbestos mining have left hills of dangerous tailings, while some of the streams have a bluish tint due to the blue asbestos extracted from the earth. Between 1978 and 1983, 780 of the 3,500 workers at the area's Penge Mines contracted a serious respiratory ailment caused by exposure to asbestos. And a health project in Mmafefe documented that a third of the villages' homes, as well as

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seven of the 12 schools, are made from asbestos brick and plaster.

This is the face of environmental racism in South Africa, a country that stands as a prime example of the stark and unsettling connections among race, gender, poverty and environmental degradation.

The environmental crisis originates in apartheid through the combination of poor land, forced overcrowding and poverty. Importation of hazardous wastes, dumping of mercury into rivers, strip mining of coal and uranium, and outdated methods of producing synthetic fuels, along with the lack of sewage facilities in many segregated areas, will present a democratic South Africa with serious environmental concerns.

Herding approximately 87 percent of the black population into 13 percent of the country's territory (comprising the "homelands") in itself spells environmental disaster. The six homelands - creations of the apartheid system that have been denied diplomatic recognition by the rest of the world - have poor-quality land, few natural resources and little infrastructure. Historically, these areas were reserved for what the white-minority government defined as "surplus peoples" - mainly women, children and the elderly. By isolating these groups in barren reservations, government and industry were assured access to a cheap source of predominantly male labor.

Lack of electricity in the homelands has resulted in dependence on fuelwood, which has in turn led to the destruction of forests. Subsequent soil erosion has made even subsistence agriculture difficult. In areas where farming is possible, pesticides and herbicides are sprayed by laborers who wear no protective clothing. Many of these chemicals are banned in the U.S. and are sometimes imported with no warning labels.

Segregated townships comprise the urban equivalent of the homelands. These sprawling and overcrowded communities are also generally without basic amenities. Rivers running alongside some townships have become fetid due to the untreated sewage and garbage dumped into them. Many people flee the rural poverty and environmental hazards of the homelands only to breathe the noxious air of these urban slums.

South Africa's mines likewise present workers as well the environment with grave dangers. Alan Durning in his "Worldwatch Paper 95" points out that for every ton of gold mined under apartheid, a black miner dies in an accident that probably would not have happened in another country.

The environmental degradation extends beyond South Africa's borders into neighboring states. Agent Orange and other defoliants were sprayed in the Mozambican and Angolan border zones as a tactic in South Africa's wars of destabilization. Members of the U.S.- and South Africa-supported Unita guerrilla army have planted millions of land mines in Angolan soil, often with no maps left to show where the mines have been sewn, thus posing a severe threat to civilians.

As South Africa moves closer to a non-racial democratic society, the country's environmental crisis looms as one of a number of obstacles that could impede progress. And when democracy does finally arrive, these problems will not suddenly vanish. For example, many U.S. corporations are planning to re-invest in South Africa, but what job-safety and environmental standards will these corporations operate under? Will South Africans know what toxins are being emitted, burned or dumped?

It is urgent that an environmental justice agenda be injected into the revised thinking about development and growth. Too many people have argued that South Africa faces more pressing issues like poverty and inadequate housing and education. They fail to see that each of these problem areas has an environmental component.

South Africa's environment must be viewed as an integral part of a just and effective economic and social policy. Having finally overcome a system that killed them with bullets and torture, black South Africans should not now have to struggle to avoid death from environmental contamination.

Hecten Kalan is director of the South African Exchange Program on Environmental Justice., located at 5 Goodrich ltd. #2, Jamaica Plain, Ma. 021311; Tel. (517) 983-2238.