The Deadly Fumes of Environmental Injustice in South Africa

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The phrase "sweet small of freedom" in South Africa is usually a figurative one. Breathe too deeply and you may be taking in heavy metals, residues of high-sulfur coal combustion, dioxins, and a variety of deadly fumes. Apartheid has left an indelible scar on the environment, which in turn has resulted in numerous hazards to public health and people's daily lives.

Under the repressive apartheid regime, black South Africans were forced to live in overcrowded homelands and townships located downhill or downstream from industrial complexes. When coupled with extreme poverty the socio-economic living and working conditions of black South Africans is distressing. Thousands of miners die annually because of hazardous conditions. Over 92,000 have died in mining accidents since the mining industry began in South Africa. Farm workers spray banned pesticides like DDT on crops with no protective clothing. Rural women walk approximately six miles daily for fuel-wood and fresh water. Children play among landfills and swim in heavily contaminated waters. This is the ugly face of environmental injustice.

Aloes: Tasting the Smell

People in the Aloes community of about 1000 people outside of Port Elizabeth (Eastern Cape Province) are in a fight for their lives. This small community is directly affected by a medical waste incinerator and two hazardous waste sites. All of these facilities are just a few hundred yards away from this informal settlement in which generations have lived.

About 20 years ago, a medical waste incinerator and a hazardous waste site were built at Aloes’ doorstep. Now Enviroserv, the company that owns and operates these two facilities, has built a second hazardous waste site, Aloes II. Aloes I is approximately 21.5 acres while Aloes His 15 acres. The incinerator chimney is on the same level as the houses in this hillside settlement so the incinerator emissions fall directly on them. On some days, leachare from the hazardous waste sites oozes through the floors of some of the houses. Leachare also runs down the hill into a smaller ditch that feeds into the beautiful Zwartskopf estuary. Heavy winds in this dry area often create dust clouds of contaminated materials.

Aloes residents are paying dearly for this contamination. They suffer from various respiratory illnesses, nasal problems, and tuberculosis. In February 1999, community spokesperson Nelson Fezi died of lung cancer. In a prophetic video interview with Dr. Paul Connect last year, Fezi predicted that he would not live to see the year 2000, given his health condition. He wondered what will happen to his children and grandchildren who live in Aloes.

The South African Human Rights Commission has launched an investigation into Enviroserve's abuses and has already held hearings. New relocation land has been identified and the community waits to hear about funding for the move. In the meantime, Fezi added in his interview, "people are dying."

Mercury at Thor Kills

Aloes is not an isolated case. Corporations all over South Africa threaten the lives of the local communities and their workers by exposing them to dangerous chemicals. In Cato Ridge, Kwazulu-Natal, the British-owned Thor Chemical plant has claimed that they were safely extracting mercury from mercury waste. The unsophisticated incinerator technology used by Thor for their extraction process has resulted in the deaths of three workers and the illness of at least 20 others. All these workers demonstrate symptoms of mercury poisoning.

Thousands of barrels of mercury waste continue to be stored at the Thor facility. Some of the drums are rusting and leaking. When it rains, the holding ponds overflow into the nearby Mwene River which has mercury levels 1500 times what the World Health Organization considers safe.

Close to half of the mercury waste on site has been sent to Thor by US companies in the '80s and early '90s. American Cyanamid, Calgon Corporation, and Borden Chemicals and Plastics have all shipped mercury waste under the guise of "recyclable products."

Louisiana-based Borden Chemicals and Plastics has exported over 2500 barrels of mercury waste to South Africa. Borden’s waste results from the production of vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) used in the manufacturing of PVC plastic. In March 1999, the US Department of Justice failed to indict Borden for their exports, claiming that Borden relied on a determination by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) that stated the waste was "recyclable" and did not require reporting under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. Interestingly, to make this judgment, DEQ relied on a letter from Borden stating that the waste did not meet the reporting requirements.

The apartheid govern men permitted such imports with no regard to the lives of the black workers or the local community. The new government is currently exploring alternatives for dealing with the mercury stockpile.

As workers and communities around the world continue to bear the brunt of environmental injustice, there is a compelling reason to create vehicles that link grassroots movements to share ideas and strategies and strengthen solidarity networks. Providing technical assistance, sharing information, and organizing people-to-people exchanges between movements is crucial if we want to build a strong international movement with a critique of the current economic, environmental, and public health conditions.

As South Africa approaches its second democratic elections, it needs to spell out a plan to promote development without contaminating the environment and threatening public health. The new South Africa has no excuse for exacerbating the current ugly face of environmental injustice. Q

Thor Chemical plant. Photo: Heeten Kalan