

Neglect and Fraud Blamed for Toxic Dumping in Ivory Coast



Boys search a landfill in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, for aluminum to sell. Ten people died after chemical waste was dumped there and across the city.
Candace Feit for The New York Times

By Lydia Polgreen

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BANGUI, Central African Republic, Nov. 23 — Mismanagement, negligence and fraud by government agencies and private companies led to the dumping of a highly toxic cocktail of petrochemical waste in Ivory Coast in August, says a government report released there on Thursday.

At least 10 people died and thousands were sickened after chemical waste pumped from a tanker chartered by Trafigura, a huge petroleum trading company based in the Netherlands, was dumped across Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast, in the main landfill and near poor neighborhoods.

Citing the “lack of rigorous management, failure to observe professional ethics and nonapplication of regulations,” the report concluded that officials at the city’s port and in several government ministries responsible for monitoring the shipping and handling of waste and petroleum had allowed the chain of events that led to the dumping, despite repeated red flags.

The waste arrived in Abidjan on Aug. 19 aboard the Probo Koala, a Greek-owned tanker flying a Panamanian flag and leased by Trafigura. The tanker carried a toxic mix of chemicals that the ship had already tried to dispose of in Amsterdam in July, saying the waste was ordinary slop from cleaning the tanks of petroleum products. But workers in Amsterdam’s port refused to take the waste for the initial price, \$15,000, saying it was toxic and would require special disposal.

Instead of paying the more than \$300,000 it would cost to dispose of the waste in Europe, the ship sailed a circuitous route that included stops in Estonia and Nigeria, eventually arriving in Abidjan, where a subsidiary of Trafigura, Puma Energie, arranged to have the waste disposed of by Tommy, a local company.

The report identified Tommy, which had agreed to dispose of the waste for just \$20,000, and its manager, Salomon Ugborugbo, as the main actors responsible for the dumping. It said the company had “neither the qualifications, the competence or the technical ability to treat this waste.”

The report said that Tommy “was created during the same period when the Probo Koala left Holland for the Ivory Coast,” and that it “had all appearances of a shell company created for the circumstance.”

Before the waste arrived, Mr. Ugborugbo wrote an electronic message to a Trafigura official, saying that he had found a place “outside the city called ‘Akbedo’ where he would dump the products,” the report said. The city landfill at Akouedo is surrounded by poor neighborhoods and frequented by thousands of people who make a living picking recyclable items from the trash.

Once the waste arrived, Tommy hired 12 tanker trucks, paying about \$250 for each, and sent them to dump the material, the report said. But the material was dumped in more than a dozen sites across the city. Trafigura said in a statement on Thursday that it was aware of the report, but was not ready to comment on it. The company said it “will continue to cooperate fully with all relevant authorities investigating this matter.”

This month, Trafigura appointed a prominent British lawyer, Lord Fraser of Carmyllie, to investigate the Probo Koala dumping. Trafigura has already said that it complied with local and international laws, and that its own analysis of the chemicals on the ship showed that they were not toxic.

But independent experts, including one at the University of Amsterdam who examined test results from waste samples, disagreed, saying the analysis showed extremely high levels of caustic soda; mercaptans, a kind of sulfur compound; and hydrogen sulfide.

Mr. Ugborugbo, who is Nigerian, has been jailed in Ivory Coast pending criminal charges, with two European officials from Trafigura and several Ivorian businessmen.

The government report released Thursday had been requested by the country’s prime minister and is not related to the criminal inquiry, which is incomplete.