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Dirty **tricks** and toxic waste in Ivory Coast

By Meirion Jones and Liz MacKean
BBC Newsnight

It is the biggest toxic dumping scandal of the 21st century, the type of environmental vandalism that international treaties are supposed to prevent. Now Newsnight can reveal the truth about the waste that was illegally tipped on Ivory Coast's biggest city, Abidjan. A giant multinational is being sued in London's High Court by thousands of Africans who claim they were injured as a result.



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The truth behind Ivory Coast toxic waste dump

Our investigation took us to Amsterdam where the waste could have been safely disposed of. Instead the company, **Trafigura**, went for the cheaper option and offloaded it in Abidjan.

Trafigura has always denied that the chemical waste was dangerous, but we have seen an analysis by the Dutch authorities which reveal it to be lethal.

We consulted a leading toxicologist, John Hoskins from the Royal Society of Chemistry. He said it would bring a major city to its knees.

The waste includes tons of phenols which can cause death by contact, tons of hydrogen sulphide, lethal if inhaled in high concentrations, and vast quantities of corrosive caustic soda and mercaptans which John Hoskins describes as "the most odorous compounds ever produced".

A terrible smell

It happened on 19 August 2006 in the dead of night. A convoy of trucks from a newly-formed company in Abidjan arrived to take the waste away. They illegally dumped the first loads at the huge tip in Aqedo.

A powerful stench soon engulfed the area. The tip's operators were called out and the drivers sent packing. They looked elsewhere to drop the waste, tipping it in at least 18 places across the city and beyond.

The Aqedo tip stretches as



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far as the eye can see. As scores of waste trucks tip their loads, an army of Abidjanis cluster around, children amongst them, brandishing long metal spikes. They pick through the rubbish, looking for anything that can be sold.

Deaths

We were soon surrounded by people, only too willing to talk about the night the toxic waste was dumped and the terrible smell that made them gag and sicken.

Just round the corner from the dump, we met Jean Francois Kouadio and his wife, Fidel.

She had been eight months pregnant with their first child when the fumes swamped their home. Fidel gave birth prematurely and the boy, Jean Claude, died within a day.

Their second child Ama Grace was born a year later. She too fell ill.

The doctors said that Ama Grace "was suffering from acute glycaemia caused by the toxic wastes".

They could do nothing for her and she died.

The medical reports state a "strong presumption" that the deaths of the two children were caused by exposure to the toxic waste and Jean Francois and Fidel now fear they will never become parents.

Polluted water

We also visited the village of Djibi, just outside Abidjan. The waste that was tipped here got into the water supply, killing the fish that fed the village.

The head of Djibi, Esaie Modto, told us that every last person here fell ill, two thousand people:

"There were women who miscarried, and that was very painful. But still, the worst was that three people, two adults and a girl were killed by the toxic wastes. That was very hard."

So what was it that brought such ruin on a country that in 2006 was still struggling to recover from a civil war?

The waste was generated as the result of an oil deal spanning three continents. **Trafigura** bought a consignment of cheap and **dirty** heavy oil with a high sulphur content. Instead of putting it through a refinery, **Trafigura** tried to clean it up, using a do-it-yourself method, so they could sell it on at a massive profit.

They used a ship called the Probo Koala which they stationed off Gibraltar as a rough and ready refinery. Caustic soda and a catalyst were added to the oil which reacted with the sulphur and settled to the bottom of the tank. **Trafigura** were then able to sell the oil, but left with a toxic sludge at the bottom of the tank.

"Smelly but not dangerous"

The Probo Koala went to Amsterdam where they attempted to unload this sulphurous tar as if it were normal ships' waste, which would have cost a few thousand euros.

However the fumes were so bad, the emergency services were called and the Dutch authorities carried out tests. They discovered the waste was highly toxic and told **Trafigura** that it would cost half a million euros to dispose of safely.

The Probo Koala instead

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“ There were women who miscarried, and that was very painful. But still, the worst was that three people, two adults and a girl were killed by the toxic wastes. That was very hard ”

Esaie Modto, head of Djibli village



Thousands of people say they were victims of the waste



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pumped the waste back on board and left port, ending up in West Africa.

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Watch the 2007 Newsnight interview with Eric de Turckheim, co-founder of [Trafigura](#)

Marietta Harjono of Greenpeace Nederland says this has led to a prosecution by the Dutch authorities for "falsification of papers - they deliberately were silent on the toxic nature of the waste", as well as for illegal import of toxic waste and "illegal export of toxic waste from Europe to Cote d'Ivoire".

When Newsnight first investigated the toxic dumping scandal in 2007 one of Trafigura's founders Eric de Turckheim told Jeremy Paxman "these materials were not dangerous for human beings. It was smelly, but not dangerous."

Newsnight's new investigation shows this was far from the case. [Trafigura](#) continues to deny any wrongdoing.

[Read Trafigura's full statement](#)

Watch Meirion Jones and Liz MacKean's investigation in full on Newsnight on Wednesday 13 May 2009 at 10.30pm on [BBC Two](#).

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