

Basel Action Network Intervention Regarding e-Waste – 24 June 2008

The Basel Action Network is disturbed by a trend we have noticed in the Basel Convention to claim great concern over the issue of electronic waste management but at the same time to seemingly ignore the fact that the most horrific examples of the crisis are as a result of transboundary movements of electronic waste most of which are illegal and most of which are exported from the United States.

While we deplore the primitive e-waste management operations in countries like China and India conducted in the informal sector, we fail to recognize that this sector thrives only because of illegal traffic conducted often on a massive scale. This illegal traffic gives this sector or I should say the bosses that control it, great power, wealth and influence. And as long as these informal sectors are allowed to thrive in this way and gain influence, we will never be able to establish ESM operations in such countries due to competition from the import fed informal sector.

It is clear to us that the pre-requisite therefore for any work on ESM in electronic waste management must be to prevent developed to developing country transboundary movement of e-Waste and in particular the massive illegal traffic that takes place every day on our global shipping lanes. Yet I find it very strange, that the Basel Convention which at its fundament is a trade control treaty, ignores this mandate and instead focuses on managing wastes, now matter if their origin is illegal or not under the Convention.

6 and ½ years ago, BAN first brought images to the world of predominantly Japanese, Canadian and US e-waste exported to a region of China known as Guiyu. These pictures sent shockwaves around the world. They depicted a cyber-age nightmare that was the result of illegal traffic. It was the Basel Convention's job, our job to do something about it. 3 weeks ago, I visited Guiyu again for the first time since our initial visit.

I am very ashamed to report that the situation in Guiyu after all of this time of full government acknowledgement, has gotten far worse. The most hazardous operations of all, the open burning of electronic wires and components and the acid stripping operations have expanded dramatically and are tragically impacting the health and livelihood of what are estimated to be 65,000 migrant workers. The workers confided to us that they are beaten by the local bosses if they say anything to journalists or foreigners about their experiences.

How is it possible that after 6 and ½ years of identifying an illegal toxic trade disaster, where the perpetrators of this trade are known, that we have allowed this to continue? Do we really believe that as horrific as the Probo Koala scandal proved to be in one week in Abidjan, that the impact to the lives and environment in China is any less of a disaster in the course of 6 and a half years of steady release and exposure of heavy metals, PAHs and dioxins? Where is the international outcry, where are the lawsuits, where are the millions of dollars provided to address the slow-motion Probo Koala incident that takes place in Guiyu daily. And on a smaller scale in many cities around the world. We have heard in the opening speeches that the Basel Convention is tackling the e-waste problem.

We have a Nairobi Declaration, so not to worry. I think not. We have a lot to worry about – right here within this Convention which we seem to have forgotten is a legally binding instrument of international law. We have a lot to worry about if we have become a Convention that seems be able to draft a lot of declarations, and draft innumerable ESM guidelines but seems unable and unwilling to enforce its own rules.

The disease of electronic waste dumping is becoming an epidemic. BAN urges all Basel Convention Parties and one signatory nation to do some soul searching and redirect priorities together with the customs authorities of your country, to begin efforts to put an end to illegal exports of hazardous electronic wastes leaving from or arriving in your country as a matter of utmost urgency.

Thank you.