

Environmental Racism: Old Wine in a New Bottle

By Dr. Deborah M. Robinson

Environmental racism can be defined as:

Racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the enforcement of regulations and laws; the deliberate targeting of people of Coloured communities for toxic and hazardous waste facilities; the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities; and the history of excluding people of colour from the leadership of the environmental movement.¹

Others have added to that definition by saying that environmental racism refers to “any government, institutional, or industry action, or failure to act, that has a negative environmental impact which disproportionately harms—*whether intentionally or unintentionally*—individuals, groups, or communities based on race or colour.”²

It is important though, to understand environmental racism in a historical context. “The exploitation of people of colour has taken the form of genocide, chattel slavery, indentured servitude and racial discrimination—in employment, housing and practically all aspects of life. Today we suffer from the remnants of this sordid history, as

well as from new and institutionalised forms of racism, facilitated by the massive post-World War II expansion of the petrochemical industry.”³

In the United States, the victims of environmental racism are African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders, who are more likely than Whites to live in environmentally hazardous conditions. Three out of five African Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. Native American lands and sacred places are home to extensive mining operations and radioactive waste sites. Three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills are located in pre-dominantly African American and Latino communities. As a consequence, the residents of these communities suffer shorter life spans, higher infant and adult



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mortality, poor health, poverty, diminished economic opportunities, substandard housing, and an overall degraded quality of life.

Environmental racism, therefore, is a new manifestation of historic racial oppression. It is merely "old wine in a new bottle."

Many people trace the birth of the environmental justice movement in the United States to the 1991 First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, DC. But there were many important antecedents to this event. In 1982, North Carolina state officials decided to locate a PCB (polychlorinated-biphenyl) landfill in a predominately African American community. In response, protestors lay down in the streets trying to block trucks carrying the toxic waste to the landfill and over 500 people were arrested. This act of civil disobedience was the first time anyone was jailed for trying to halt a toxic waste landfill.⁴

One of those arrested was US Congressman Walter Fauntroy. He later asked the US General Accounting Office (a federal agency) to determine the correlation between the location of hazardous waste landfills and the racial and economic status of the surrounding communities in that region. The GAO

study concluded that, "Blacks make up the majority of the population in three out of four communities where landfills are located."⁵

The landmark 1987 report by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, Toxic Wastes and Race, extended the GAO study. It was based on a national study that mapped the location of toxic waste sites and the racial composition of the community. They found that people of colour were twice as likely as White people to live in a community with a commercial hazardous waste management facility, and three times as likely to live in a community with multiple facilities.

Further analysis and studies by others proved that *race is the number one predictor of where toxic sites are located.*

For more than a decade, environmental racism in the United States has been well-documented by NGOs, universities, and even the US government.⁶ However, the government has provided no effective remedies to the victims of these racist practices, nor has it taken effective action to stop such practices from occurring in the future.

Examples of Environmental Racism in the United States

NEW MEXICO – Farm workers work on crops that are treated with toxic pesticides, and pesticide exposure can result in death, birth defects, cancer, nerve disorders, skin diseases and other problems. The federal government has

failed to protect farm workers and it was feared that this environmental protection would become weaker under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "In the case of our farm worker community, the state of New Mexico has committed a tragic injustice by the discriminatory exclusion of agricultural workers from the workers compensation system."⁷

ROSEBUD RESERVATION, SOUTH DAKOTA⁸

- As state environmental regulations have become more stringent in recent years, Native American reservations have become prime targets of waste disposal firms. As of 1992, the leaders of more than 100 reservations have been approached by such firms. Many waste-disposal companies have attempted to avoid state regulations (which are often tougher than federal regulations) by targeting Native lands. Because of their quasi-independent status, Native American reservations are not covered by state environmental regulations. In 1991, a Connecticut-based company proposed to build a 6,000 acre municipal landfill on Sioux land. Solid waste from other areas would be dumped on Sioux land. Local residents founded the Good Road Coalition and appealed to the Tribal Council to rescind the contract signed with the company. They were able to block construction of the landfill.

MOSSVILLE, LOUISIANA – There are over 30 petrochemical and industrial plants located within a 2-mile area of Mossville (an African American community in rural Louisiana). Condea Vista and PPG, two vinyl companies

bordering the community of Mossville, have admitted to contaminating water with millions of pounds of ethylene dichloride (EDC), a suspected human carcinogen. In November 1999, a United States government health agency issued an alarming report that "dioxin levels are elevated in residents of Mossville";⁹ that the types of dioxin found in the blood of residents "appeared to be locally generated";¹⁰ and that "local exposures are at least partially responsible for these levels."¹¹ Dioxin is a persistent organic pollutant and is recognised as the most toxic substance known to science because of its wide variety of destructive effects, including damage to human reproduction, cancer, hormone disruption, and severe impairment of a child's physical and cognitive development.

Environmental Racism on a Global Scale

Many have noted¹² that there is a direct relationship between the increasing globalisation of the economy and environmental degradation of habitats and the living spaces for many of the world's peoples.

In many places where Black, minority, poor or Indigenous peoples live, oil, timber and minerals are extracted in such a way as to devastate ecosystems and destroy the people's culture and livelihood.¹³ Waste from both high- and low-tech industries, much of it toxic, has polluted groundwater, the soil and the atmosphere. The globalisation of the chemical industry is increasing the levels of persistent organic pollutants, such as dioxin, in the

environment. Further, the mobility of corporations has made it possible for them to seek the greatest profit, the least government and environmental regulations, and the best tax incentives, anywhere in the world.

The destructive effects of environmental racism, therefore, are not exclusive to the United States. "Racism and globalisation come together in the



environment, with the phenomenon referred to as "global environmental racism"—a manifestation of a policy which has found domestic expression in countries like the United States, but which also has a global dimension."¹⁴

Environmental racism, although not new, is a recent example of the historical double standard as to what is acceptable in certain communities, villages or cities and not in others. One example of this double standard is the environmentally devastating method of extracting natural resources, utilised by multinational corporations in developing countries. This has been the case with the Ogoni and other peoples of

the Niger Delta in Nigeria, the U'wa people in northeast Colombia, the Amungme of West Papua (Indonesia), the Indigenous people of Burma, and numerous others.

Other Examples of Environmental Racism from a Global Perspective

THE US-MEXICAN BORDER –

Approximately 2,000 *maquiladoras* line the US-Mexican border. Corporate headquarters remain north of *la linea* (the line, or border that separates the United States from Mexico), while assembly plants are mushrooming south of the border. Corporations reap record profits, while poor and working communities on both sides of *la linea* are consigned to low-wage jobs and environmental health hazards.

The US-Mexico border is a microcosm of North-South relations in a global economy where corporations call the shots, and poor nations sell off labour rights and the environment to the highest bidder. There is no "right to know" law in Mexico, so both workers and communities are denied information about the toxins to which they are exposed. Companies pollute freely, degrading the border environment. Toxic waste, which should be returned to the U.S. or other countries by law, is often stored on site, posing a health risk to both workers and surrounding communities. Border communities report a deterioration of public health ranging from respiratory problems to skin irritations and neurological disorders believed to be caused by industrial pollution.

NIGERIA – The only thing that has changed in the Niger Delta, since the return to civilian government, is that protests have become increasingly violent and some are openly lawless. There has been no meaningful change in the substantive issues facing the minority communities in the Delta; the revenue allocation formula (how the Nigerian government decides to spend the money generated from oil sales) has not changed, gas flaring still goes on 24 hours a day in many communities, oil spills still occur, water is polluted, in some places there is still no electricity, etc. Although this region produces close to two million barrels of oil per day, it is among the poorest in the country. With oil bringing in 90 percent of the government's foreign exchange, the police and military move quickly to stop any demonstrations or disruption of the flow of oil.

WEST PAPUA (IRIAN JAYA, INDONESIA) – Black people in this Asian and Pacific territory are not only struggling for independence, but are also fighting Freeport-McMoRan which operates one of the world's biggest copper and gold mines there. The region around the mine is closed off to outsiders, as well as to the traditional landowners, who have been dispossessed. The mine has been accused of dumping 130,000 tons of waste rock (known as tailings) every day into local rivers. The military is used to guard the mine and protect the resources. They have been implicated in numerous human rights violations against the people.

The impact that extraction and processing industries have on human health and quality of life doesn't matter. People are increasingly unwanted and unneeded for increased profit; they are becoming disposable.

ECUADOR – From 1964 to 1990, Texaco, through its subsidiary Texaco Petroleum Company (TexPet), controlled over 80 percent of the oil production in Ecuador. In 1993, a US\$1.5 billion class action suit was filed in New York against Texaco, charging that it improperly dumped large quantities of toxic byproducts into the local rivers. (Reinjection is the prevailing industry practice, more expensive but more environmentally sound.) It was also alleged that Texaco used other improper means of eliminating toxic substances, such as burning them and spreading them on local dirt roads. It is reported that their operations resulted in deforestation of more than two million acres of rainforest, displacement of indigenous communities, and extensive water pollution that created a regional health crisis. Members of indigenous tribes have unusually high rates of cancer, skin rashes and respiratory ailments.

DUMPING OF TOXIC WASTES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES – “Between 1989 and 1994, it is estimated that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries exported 2,611,677 metric tons of hazardous wastes to non-OECD countries.”¹⁵ The illicit movement and dumping of toxic and dangerous

substances and wastes constitute a serious threat to the life and health of individuals, particularly in developing countries that do not have the technologies to process them. Although the Basel Convention prohibits the transshipment of many forms of toxic waste, “products such as pesticides and other chemicals banned or severely restricted by the United States, Western Europe and Japan because of their acute toxicity, environmental persistence or carcinogenic qualities are still regularly sent to the Third World.”¹⁶

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Illicit Dumping of Toxic Wastes has been asked to examine racially motivated discrimination practices in relation to the illicit movement and dumping of toxic and dangerous products and wastes.¹⁷

Why is this happening?

RACISM – First, a double standard exists as to what practices are acceptable in certain communities, villages or cities and not in others. Second, people of colour around the world pay a greater and disproportionate price for economic development, resources extraction and industrialism in terms of their health, quality of life and livelihood. Although corporate greed and the lack of corporate accountability explains a

tremendous amount of what is described above, racism, in the form of environmental racism, plays a significant role that must not be overlooked.

TRANSNATIONAL POWER AND THE MOBILITY OF GLOBAL CORPORATIONS

Financial institutions and trade agreements have facilitated the movement of capital and goods across borders. Corporations have become more powerful than nation states and are not accountable to anyone except their shareholders. Their mobility has made it possible for them to seek the greatest profit, the least government regulations, and the best tax incentives, anywhere in the world. Workers are exposed to economic and environmental blackmail; they either accept low-paying, often non-unionised jobs with environmental health risks, or the jobs will move to another country.

PROFITS BEFORE PEOPLE – Some have argued that resource wars will be the impetus for the major conflicts in the 21st century.¹⁸ Traditional land rights and sacred cultural sites are under-valued when they interfere with gaining access to resources and therefore profit. The impact that extraction and processing industries have on human health and quality of life doesn't matter. People are increasingly unwanted and unneeded for increased profit; they are becoming disposable.

LOWER ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS ABROAD – More stringent environmental regulations in the United States have contributed to the downsizing of operations there and the

expansion of activities in other countries. Large oil companies are under-investing in and selling off their U.S. refineries, while focusing their investment efforts on new overseas drilling opportunities where their return on capital is higher.

LACK OF POWER – Minority groups in Nigeria, small rural African American communities in Louisiana, indigenous peoples around the world and others share something in common—they lack the political power, they lack information and vital global strategies to take on powerful multinational corporations and/or repressive states or national governments/regimes.

What can be done?

To fight against environmental degradation and repressive economic policies, people have been relying on changing national governments, their policies and agencies. They engage mainly in national networking and national resistance strategies.

But as Karliner (1997) and others have noted, “as the centres of political and economic power shift from the nation-state toward an international economic system increasingly dominated by transnational corporations, shifting also are the strategies, tactics and targets of movements working on social and environmental justice.”¹⁹ Richard Falk (1993) posits that a new paradigm, “globalisation from below,” is needed during this historical period. Globalisation from below is based on a global civic society that seeks to extend

ideas of moral, legal and environmental accountability to those now acting on behalf of the state, market and media. Others have noted the need for transborder alliances,²⁰ a global society²¹ and global social movements.²²

It is clear that global networking and global resistance are necessary strategies to solve the problems of environmental racism.

The United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in 2001 will examine contemporary manifestations of racism and strategies to achieve full and effective equality. This conference, and the preparatory processes that lead up to it, provide an excellent opportunity to highlight examples of environmental racism globally, develop global networks of organisations involved in environmental and economic justice advocacy, and begin development strategies of mutual solidarity actions. The Regional PrepComs organised by the United Nations, and those being organised by the World Council of Churches, will enable people to make links on a regional level. The issue of environmental racism must be taken up at these regional PrepComs and its inclusion on the agenda of the World Conference must be stressed.

Environmental racism is just old wine in a new bottle. It is essential to address this issue seriously at the World Conference in 2001, to identify both domestic and international remedies for

victims of environmental racism, and to ensure that the member states' Programme of Action includes concrete measures to ensure environmental justice for all.

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Reprinted from *Echoes: Justice, Peace and Creation News*, published by the World Council of Churches' Cluster on "Issues and Themes," Justice, Peace and Creation Team, 17/2000.

Notes:

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⁴ Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990, p.31.

⁵ United States General Accounting Office, Pub. No. B-211461, *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities*, US Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1983.

⁶ A partial listing of such reports include the United States General Accounting Office, Pub. No. B-211461, *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities* (1983); Commission for Racial Justice, *United Church of Christ, Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (1987); Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Westview Press 1990); Harvey L. White, "Hazardous Waste Incineration and Minority Communities" in *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse 126* (Bunyan Bryant & Paul Mohai eds., 1992); Paul Mohai & Bunyan Bryant, "Environmental Racism: Reviewing the Evidence" in *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse 126* (Bunyan Bryant & Paul Mohai eds., 1992); Marianne Lavelle & Marcia Coyle, "Unequal Protection: The Racial Divide in Environmental Law," *National Law Journal* of S2 (September 21, 1992); and the Louisiana Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *The Battle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana... Government, Industry and the People* (1993).

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¹⁰ Letter from Orris, P. to Phargood-Wade, et al. of 9/29/99; Orris, P., Kirkland, K., Report on Consulting Activities Related to Mossville, LA, Cook County Hospital and Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics, November 4, 1999.

¹¹ Id.

¹² See for instance, Joshua Karliner, *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997; Vandana Shiva, "The Greening of

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¹⁶ Joshua Karliner, *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997, p. 152.

¹⁷ United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 56th Session, resolution on the Illicit Dumping of Toxic Wastes (E7CN.472000/L.97).

¹⁸ Barbara Rose Johnson (ed.) *Who Pays the Price? The Sociocultural Context of the Environmental Crisis*, Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994.

¹⁹ Joshua Karliner, *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997, p. 198.

²⁰ Muto Ichiyo, "Global Democracy and the Transborder Alliance of People," a paper presented at the Manila Peoples Forum on APEC held in November 1996 and posted on the Corporate Watch website (www.corpwatch.org/trac/feature/planet/gr_focus.html).

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