



# Overview of Hazardous Waste Problems in SEAR Countries

SEAR is a region with a significant amount of consumption of chemicals. It is also heavily involved in the production of chemicals. Both, local consumption and manufacture of chemicals lead to the generation of hazardous wastes. Agriculture and Health contribute to the mountain of hazardous wastes produced annually, 338 million tons in 2001, according to the Basel Convention (Annex 10, P21). Hazardous waste refers to any waste that could pose a threat to human health and the environment, if managed improperly. Hazardous waste exhibits

any of the following characteristics: ignitability, corrosivity, reactivity, infectiosity or toxicity. Wastes from chemical incidents such as Bhopal (see box 1) and from health services also pertain to this group. Managing hazardous wastes in SEAR still poses major challenges, many of which are of legal nature.

SEAR member states also import hazardous wastes for recycling. Due to loopholes in the current legal systems, custom authorities can take on-the-spot decisions and provide ad-hoc rules exemptions. Further, there is poor distinction between capital goods and non-capital goods; as an example, old computers imported as a donation would come under the 'capital goods' category and access various tax benefits.

Over 500 million used computers are exported to Asia, annually. On an average a computer is 23% plastic, 32% ferrous metals, 18% non-ferrous metals (lead, cadmium, antimony, beryllium, chromium and mercury), 12% electronic boards (gold, palladium, silver and platinum) and 15% glass. Only about 50% of the computer is recycled, the rest is dumped. The toxicity of the waste is mostly due to the lead, mercury and cadmium — non-recyclable components of a single computer may contain almost 2 kilograms of lead. A large portion of the plastic used contains flame retardants, which makes it difficult to recycle (Source: Annex 10, P21).

**Table 1**

Estimated annual generation of hazardous wastes in some SEAR countries

Country	Total (MT)	Kg/capita
<b>Bangladesh(*)</b>	960,000	2.7
<b>India(**)</b>	86,000,000	90
<b>Indonesia</b>	11,100,000	55
<b>Maldives</b>	352	1.3
<b>Myanmar</b>	188,500	4.0
<b>Nepal</b>	33,500	1.5
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	67,950 (***)	3.7
<b>Thailand</b>	1,630,000	27

Source: Strengthening of Hazardous Waste Management in the Countries of South East Asia, WHO SEARO, 2000

**Notes:**

(\*): Of which 93 400 MT are pharmaceutical wastes;

(\*\*): Of which 7,300,000 MT are pharmaceutical wastes;

(\*\*\*): The Sri Lanka delegate at the workshop reported an estimate of 57 890 MT for 2002

The Bhopal gas leakage in 1984 is considered the worst ever chemical incident in history. Bhopal, India became a global symbol of industrial dangers to health when a chemical reaction at a Union Carbide pesticide plant released 40 tons of toxic gas over the city, on the night of 2nd to 3rd December 1984. The accident has claimed 16,000 lives to date. More than 7,000 people died within a matter of days. Over the last 21 years exposure to the toxins has resulted in chronic illnesses for thousands of others, for which treatment is largely ineffective.



*Protesters outside the Dow Chemical headquarters in Mumbai, during a demonstration in December 2002 to mark the anniversary of the disaster, demand the clean-up of Bhopal. © Maude Dorr.*

21 years later, the survivors still await just compensation, adequate medical assistance and treatment, as well as comprehensive economic and social rehabilitation. The site of the tragedy, has still not been cleaned up. Consequently, toxic wastes continue to pollute the environment and contaminate the water that surrounding communities rely on. Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), then owner of the pesticide factory in Bhopal, and Dow Chemical, which merged with UCC in 2001, have publicly denied all responsibility for the leakage and the resulting damage. Astonishingly, no one has been held responsible.

**More at:** <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/ec-bhopal-eng>

