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**THE EVIDENCE OF TOXIC AND RADIOACTIVE WASTES DUMPING IN SOMALIA  
AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ENJOYMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS: A CASE STUDY**

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# THE EVIDENCE OF TOXIC AND RADIOACTIVE WASTES DUMPING IN SOMALIA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ENJOYMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS: A CASE STUDY

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## **I. Summary**

Although many developing countries, especially African countries, have been victim of the adverse effects of highly toxic wastes (HTW) originated from the developed countries, the case of Somalia is particularly preoccupying. The country has been subjected to extensive illegal dumping operations of toxic and radioactive wastes since the 1980s. The HTW dumping operations that have taken place both along the coast and the hinterland have extremely adverse effects on health, livelihoods and the future prospect of sustainable development of the local population. Furthermore, along with other internationally-driven illegal economic and other strategic interests (e.g. the industrial-scale Illegal Unregulated and Unreported overfishing on the part of foreign companies), the issue of the toxic wastes dumping has contributed to the perpetuation and exacerbation of the deadly effects of the armed conflict which has been going on in Somalia for the last two decades. While Somalia itself has not yet an effective government, the international community has failed to tackle the toxic waste dumping issue and other closely related internationally-driven illegal activities in Somalia. In this respect, lack of “sufficient evidence” of toxic waste dumping in Somalia is often advanced as an argument to justify the aforementioned inaction.

The purpose of this case study report is to contribute significantly to the available evidence of the long-running toxic waste dumping in Somalia and its negative impact on the enjoyment of the fundamental human rights of the affected population. Drawing on authoritative sources and careful analysis, the paper concludes that the toxic wastes dumping in Somalia is real and it has compromised (irreversibly) the human health, natural environment, food security and the long-term development prospects of the

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affected population. And, consequently, it has denied the victims the enjoyment of their fundamental human rights including the right to life, healthy environment and food security.

To reverse this tragic trend, the paper recommends a number of concrete measures including an urgent mission on the part of the Special Rapporteur on toxic wastes to Somalia, in-depth and extensive field research, the identification, isolation and reclamation of the polluted sites and full assessment of the nature and the scale of the polluting chemicals and other hazardous wastes. It also recommends the adoption of effective deterring measures against the toxic traffickers at international level.

## **II. Background information**

Long before the collapse of the Somali state in January 1991, Somalia was one of the least developed countries in the world. The country's mainly pastoral economy used to rely heavily on transhumant livestock rearing, limited farming and artisan fishing. Even today, more than ever, the livelihoods of the overwhelming majority of the population depend strictly on the state (i.e. healthiness) of the natural environment. On the other hand, in the last two decades the country has been devastated by a complex combination of a myriad of problems including political violence and protracted civil war, mass displacement of the civilians caught in the conflict (both in the form of refugees in the neighboring countries and Internally Displaced Persons - IDPs), lawlessness and the lack of effective public institutions, natural disasters and unprecedented environment degradation. Aside from the naturally occurring environmental problems such as the persistent severe droughts, Tsunami, occasional flush floods and climate change, the man-made environmental emergencies facing Somalia are particularly severe. These include, *inter alia*, an alarming rate of deforestation fuelled by an extensive and indiscriminate charcoal burning for export to the Middle East markets, intensive illegal overfishing on the part of foreign fleets as well as extensive large-scale dumping operations of highly toxic chemical and radioactive wastes.

According to many accounts including some reports released by specialized international agencies such as the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), Greenpeace and other international environmentalist organizations, **Somalia has been used extensively by foreign companies and their partners as a dumping ground to dispose large quantities of highly toxic waste from the industrialized countries.** Although the country already had become a victim of what is sometimes called “**toxic colonialism**” as early as the mid 1980s, the illegal dumping of the hazardous wastes in Somalia has become a rampant phenomenon after 1990. The impact of the toxic wastes dumping has been devastating as it has gravely compromised the human health, livelihoods sources for the local population and the quality of the natural environment. Furthermore, from the international literature it is clear that, for example in the 1990s, **the Somali warring parties used to accept hazardous and highly toxic wastes in exchange of army and ammunition**<sup>2</sup>. It follows that the toxic wastes dumping in Somalia has been one of the main drivers of the armed conflict that has ruined the country.

Despite the gravity of its negative impact and its role as one of the main external drivers of the Somali crisis, the problem of the illegal toxic wastes dumping in Somalia has been overshadowed by the long-running armed conflict and the ensuing complex humanitarian emergency. Similarly, **the conflict has also been–fuelled by other internationally-driven illegal activities such as arms smuggling and widespread Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) overfishing by foreign companies.** Taken together, these are closely related pillars that underpin the international component of the war economy which took its roots in Somalia in the early 1990s. The international media have been covering intermittently the intractable conflict in Somalia which has been gradually but rapidly evolving over the past two decades from a local struggle between rival clan militias over political power and the control over resources to international proxy wars with regional and global agendas. Lately, however, at international level, the problem of the Somali sea piracy, which is relatively a novel offshoot of the bigger crisis in the country, has attracted the attention of the international community more than anything

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Carazzolo et al (2002). *Ilaria Alpi: Un Omicidio Al Crocevia dei Traffici*, second edition, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano, pp 206.

else. In fact, the Somali sea piracy represents a real threat for the safety of the international maritime transportation in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. Consequently, the world community has been very quick to respond to this growing threat as many countries have sent their warships to the Somali seas including the European Union (e.g. Operation Atlanta), NATO, Russia, China, India, Korea, Japan, Iran, etc. On the contrary, against the other equally but even more harmful criminal phenomena such as the dumping of huge amount of toxic wastes in Somalia and the IUU overfishing on the part of foreign companies, the international community has failed to address adequately<sup>3</sup>. This negligence could be seen particularly grave if the close relationship between all the aforementioned illegal activities, the long-lasting human suffering and instability in Somalia are taken into account. Along the internal factors, Somalia's political and economic crisis is fuelled and perpetuated by internationally-driven economic and other strategic interests. In this respect, **according to the UN Special Representative for Somalia Mr. Ahmedou Ould-Abdalla, "piracy, illegal fishing and the dumping of chemical waste, toxic and possibly nuclear waste in Somalia means struggle for power by Somali warlords is flawed"**<sup>4</sup>.

### **III. The evidence of the toxic waste dumping in Somalia**

As far as can be documented, since the early 1980s, Somalia has been a victim of what has been dubbed as "toxic colonialism". The extensive illegal export of the hazardous toxic wastes from the industrialized countries to Somalia, including radioactive waste, has been denounced in many occasions by various institutions ranging from the United Nations to Greenpeace, from judiciary authorities and political institutions of some European countries to civil society organizations all the way to the international media. In this context, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) launched its first high profile official alarm in September 1992. **The then Executive Director of UNEP, Dr. Mostafa Tolba, confirmed<sup>5</sup> that European companies had been taking advantage of**

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Mohamed Abshir Waldo (2009). The two piracies in Somalia: Why the world ignores the other? [http://www.wardheernews.com/Articles\\_09/Jan/Waldo/08\\_The\\_two\\_piracies\\_in\\_Somalia.html](http://www.wardheernews.com/Articles_09/Jan/Waldo/08_The_two_piracies_in_Somalia.html)

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from the politics.co.uk. The quoted statement is a passage of an interview dated 20<sup>th</sup> June 2008.

<sup>5</sup> NewScientists (19/0991992). Toxic Waste adds to Somalia's woes. Accessed on 25/01/2010 at [www.newscientist.com/mg13518190.400-toxic-waste-adds-to-somalias-woes.html](http://www.newscientist.com/mg13518190.400-toxic-waste-adds-to-somalias-woes.html)

**the on-going political chaos and civil war in Somalia in order to dump illegally hazardous toxic wastes onto the country's long coasts.** Immediately thereafter, Greenpeace Italy had made public the names of some of the companies involved in these transboundary illegal operations at a time when Somalia was going through a violent civil war and without an internationally recognized government. In a statement released on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1992, in coordination with Greenpeace Switzerland, the Director of Greenpeace Italia Mr. Roberto Ferigno<sup>6</sup> disclosed that some European companies had been involved in an illegal deal with a self-appointed Somali minister to export to Somalia five hundred thousand tons of toxic waste per year over a period of twenty years (1992 – 2011).

Likewise, in November 1998, the Italian weekly magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* had reported that, in 1997, UNEP undertook an extensive fact-finding field mission along the Somali coasts<sup>7</sup>. The journalists reported that they had obtained a copy of the assessment report according to which **UNEP's mission confirmed the toxic waste dumping along the Somali coast.**

Similarly, in 1998, a team of journalists from *Famiglia Cristiana*, *La Repubblica*, *TV Svizzera*, *Radio Popolare*, *Agenzia Italia* and other freelance journalists and photo reporters travelled to Kenya and Somalia; among other objectives, this international mission aimed to investigate a possible plot behind the assassination in 1994 of two Italian TV journalists (Ilaria Alpi and Miran Hrovatin) in Somalia and its relation with the toxic waste dumping and other closely related internationally-driven illicit practices in Somalia. The team had visited some of the suspected dumping sites all over Somalia. They had also interviewed a lot of relevant people on the ground and visited the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi. Based on the collected information and findings of the team, the report of the *Famiglia Cristiana* confirmed the long-running toxic waste dumping in Somalia and other associated illegal practices such as international arms trafficking. In

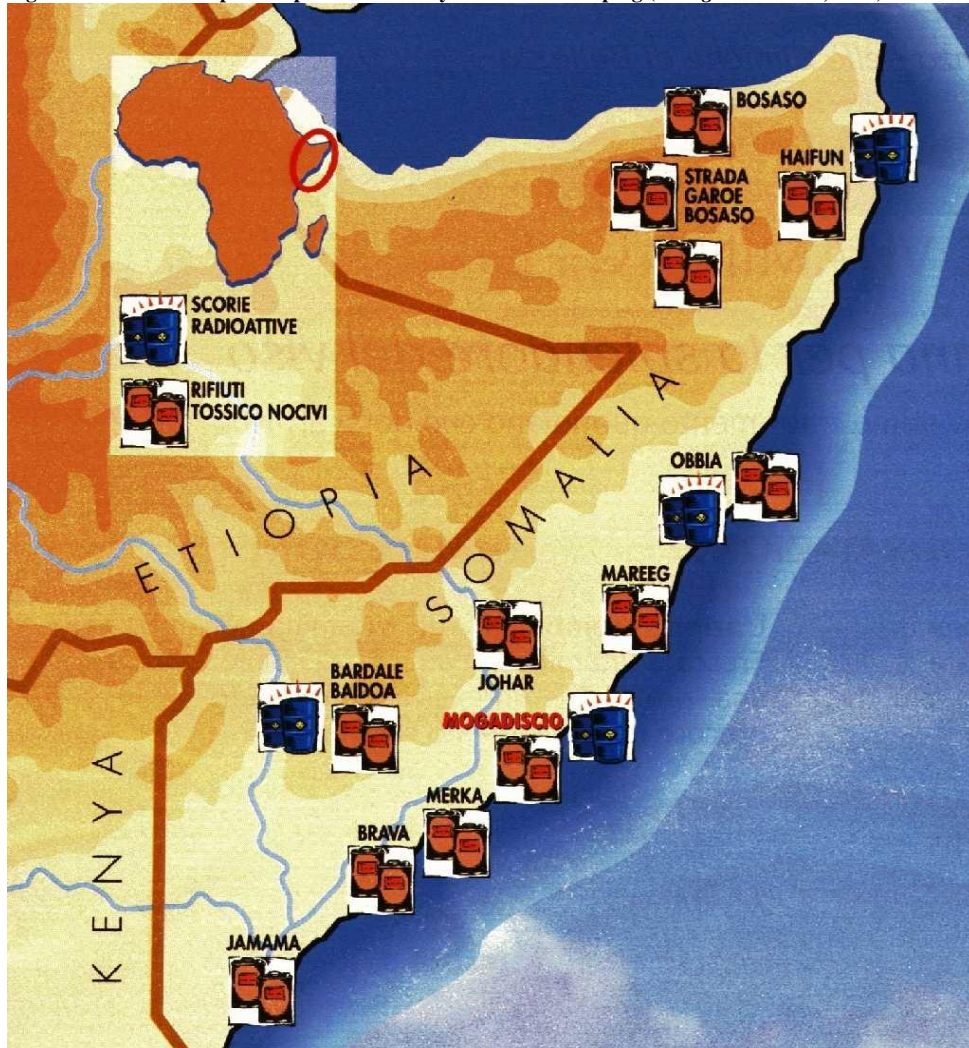
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<sup>6</sup> Greenpeace Italy (9/09/1992). Accessed on 25/01/2010. [www.beppegrillo.it/200508/debiti\\_in\\_salot.html](http://www.beppegrillo.it/200508/debiti_in_salot.html)

<sup>7</sup> Famiglia Cristiana (29/11/1998). Somalia: Il Traffico che uccide. Accessed on 25/01/2010. [www.stpauls.it/fc98/4798fc84.htm](http://www.stpauls.it/fc98/4798fc84.htm)

addition, based on the information and literature sources obtained both from European sources and from the field, among other insights, the team came up for the first time with a tentative **map of the polluted sites in Somalia** where the dumping activities have with all likelihood taken place (fig.1).

Figure 1. Tentative map of the polluted areas by toxic waste dumping (*Famiglia Cristiana*, 1998)



Immediately **after the Tsunami disaster** which hit also the Somali coast in December 2004 along with a dozen of other countries, the sea stirred up rotting containers and leaking drums full of toxic substances that were previously dumped off the coast. The poisonous content contaminated the water sources and the air whereby the adverse effects

were felt as far as ten kilometers from the coast into the hinterland. Following to this disaster, once again, **UNEP rang the alarm bells. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2005, the UN agency issued an official statement<sup>8</sup> according to which “Somalia’s coastline has been used as a dumping ground for other countries’ nuclear and hazardous wastes for many years as a result of the long civil war and, thus, the inability of the authorities to police shipments or handle the wastes”.**

Likewise, in 2006, the Mogadishu-based Somali NGO called *Daryeel Bulsho Guud* (DBG), whose staff members were trained and equipped by international agencies, carried out a survey along the coastal regions of South-Central Somalia. **The team had found 15 sealed containers washed ashore by the Tsunami** (see Fig.2).

Figure 2. Some of the suspected toxic waste containers (*Daryeel Bulsho Guud, 2006. Published by Somalitalk.com*)



In a report released in October 2000 by an Italian parliamentary commission it was indicated that, according to parliamentary hearings, **Somalia has been for years and remains to be one of the preferred destinations for huge quantity of toxic wastes exported from Europe and other industrialized countries<sup>9</sup>.** In addition, the report pointed out a “clear overlap” between the illicit transboundary traffic of toxic wastes and army smuggling into Somalia.

<sup>8</sup> UNEP, Press Release UNEP/268, February 22, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul ciclo dei rifiuti e sulle attività illecite ad esso connesse (2000). Proposta di documento sui traffici illeciti e le ecomafie.

More recently, as reported by *Agence France-Presse* AFP in July 2009, the UN **special envoy for Somalia Mr. Ahmedou Ould Abdallah has declared: “I’m convinced there is solid waste and probably nuclear waste (...) it is disaster out the Somali coast, a disaster for the Somali people and (their) environment”**<sup>10</sup>.

Reportedly, a great deal of the toxic wastes exported to Somalia passes through Italy because unscrupulous waste brokers operating from Italy import (toxic) waste also from other industrialized countries only to hand it over to criminal organizations known as “*Ecomafia*” with whom they deal as de facto business partners to get rid of the waste cheaply. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, it seems that these unscrupulous private companies and the traditional underground criminal organizations are not alone in implementing and profiting from the illegal export of the hazardous waste to Somalia at the expense of the health, livelihoods and the long term development prospects of the local population. On many occasions, from various legal procedures and investigations that had been carried out for example by various Italian tribunals, it emerged that this sinister scheme had sometimes close relationship with some apparently corrupted high-ranked politicians. In this regard, it is worth recalling the testimony of two key people who have been involved in this “business” from two opposing sides<sup>11</sup>.

1. In November 1999, Mr. Marcello Giannoni, an Italian businessman who was active in the sector of the “Special Wastes” and who had been personally involved in the toxic wastes export to Somalia, told the Italian magistrates investigating these issues that **“at the end of the 1980s until the first years of the 1990s, there was a very powerful politician who was involved** [in the illegal export to and subsequent dumping of radioactive waste in Somalia]. (...) I can’t disclose his name but he was a very powerful politician”. Mr. Giannoni also told the investigators that “the idea was to mix highly toxic waste imported from America (including radioactive waste) with Italian waste and send the whole thing to Somalia”. According to this account, as a matter of fact, this toxic waste had reached Somalia.

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<sup>10</sup> AFP (25/07/2009). UN envoy decries illegal fishing, waste dumping off Somalia. Accessed on 25/01/2010 at [http://afp.google.com/article/AlegM5gW\\_gQDsp1m8v7npcumVc5McYV-Q](http://afp.google.com/article/AlegM5gW_gQDsp1m8v7npcumVc5McYV-Q)

<sup>11</sup> Translated by the author from Italian language, these statements were quoted on RAINews 24 (Italian Public Television), September 23, 2005.

2. In an interview aired by the Italian state-owned television (RAI) in 2005, Dr. Luciano Tarditi, an Italian public prosecutor who have been investigating these illicit activities declared that: **“In the 1980s and the whole 1990s (...) the big European industry, and I believe with a significant American contribution, had implemented a large scale export of toxic wastes in the Horn of Africa”**. Dr. Tarditi is also sure that all this couldn't happen “without political blessing (*copertura politica*) and without enjoying some sort of protection given the fact that the export in question has been of strategic nature”.

Moreover, in an official hearing in 2006, an Italian Minister told the aforementioned special parliamentary commission that **“numerous elements indicate the involvement in the previously mentioned [toxic waste and army] traffic of European and non-European countries as well as the Mafia and other individuals including a well known broker** who is also involved in a series of issues related to Somalia”<sup>12</sup>.

If accurate, the above reported statements would imply clearly that the illegal trafficking of the highly toxic wastes to Somalia is much more complex than a simple criminal phenomenon run by underground criminal organizations and their (business) partners.

#### **IV. Examples of the negative impact on the health of the population**

It goes without saying that the negative impacts of such long-running and extensive dumping operations of highly toxic wastes are potentially devastating in many ways both in the short and the long term. Following are only few examples of such consequences specifically in the area of human health. To begin with, it has to be noted that in Somalia, because of the collapse of the state in 1991 and the violent armed conflict, almost all public institutions ceased to function nearly two decades ago; the country's main hospitals and other public health services were not an exception. Particularly, in Central and Southern Somalia, which is not only the main theatre of the protracted violence but also the epicenter of the toxic wastes dumping, only few private clinics have been

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<sup>12</sup> Legambiente (2006). Report on Ecomafia. pp 349.

operating along with some sanitation posts sponsored by international aid agencies. It follows that it has been impossible to monitor the health problems of the local population in a systematic and coordinated manner let alone addressing these problems adequately. Nonetheless, since the mid 1990s, based on medical, media and other international reports, extremely worrying health problems, including unknown diseases, have affected both people and animals in Somalia.

According to the UNEP's already mentioned statement that was released immediately after the Tsunami, "**in Somalia there is evidence that hazardous wastes from dump sites have contaminated ground water**". UNEP had also reported that the people were complaining of unusual health problems including "**acute respiratory infections, heavy dry coughing, mouth bleeding abdominal hemorrhage and unusual chemical skin reaction**".

Figure 3. A man suffering from unusual skin disease in Lower Shabelle region, Somalia (*Dayniile.com, 2010*)



Likewise, both Somali and non-Somali medical doctors working in Somalia have reported an excessive **incidence of cancer, unknown diseases, spontaneous miscarriages of the pregnant women and child malformation**. For example, in 1994, a **doctor reported<sup>13</sup> an unusually high number of patients suffering from thyroid, tongue and colon cancer as well as malformed newborn babies in the coastal city of Merka**. Also, as reported by the Mogadishu-based *HornAfrik* radio in March 2005, the doctors working at the SOS hospital in Mogadishu reported **an excessive number of malformed babies<sup>14</sup>**. According to this account, Dr. Bashir Sheikh Omar, the head of the maternity ward of the hospital attributed this unusual trend to the toxic waste dumping in the coastal areas around the Somali capital. Furthermore, after their fact-finding mission in Somalia in 1998, the journalists of the *Famiglia Cristiana*, on their way back to Nairobi, met with **Dr. Pirko Honenen of UNICEF Somalia** who was just back from a field trip in the Somali town of Bardale at the west of Baidoa city. The journalists quoted Dr. Honenen as saying “**a new unknown disease is killing people in Bardale in high numbers**”. She also added that “**there were already more than 120 victims in two months (...) and, the symptoms are high fever, trembling, nose and mouth hemorrhage**”<sup>15</sup>.

In addition, in the summer 2005, an Italian team consisting this time not only of journalists (including TV operators) but also of a member of the Italian Parliament, the Honorable Mauro Bulgarelli, had toured some of the suspected dumping sites together with the current Somali Ambassador to the UN Office at Geneva, H.E. Mr. Yusuf Mohamed Ismail Bari-Bari. While in the coastal area of Warsheikh nearby Mogadishu, among other relevant people, the team had met and interviewed **Dr. Gabriele Lonardi, a medical doctor working with an Italian Non-Governmental Organization** called

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Carazzolo et al (2002). *Ilaria Alpi: Un Omicidio Al Crocevia dei Traffici*, second edition, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano, pp 54.

<sup>14</sup> Since mid 1990s, the problem of the sharp increase of the congenital anomalies among the newborn babies in Somalia is painfully all too popular in Somalia as any week hardly passes without seeing new pictures of these suffering babies on the Somali websites for whom the parents are appealing to the Somali Diaspora living abroad for support as there are no specialized doctors or adequate equipments to operate them in Somalia.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

INTERSOS. Dr. Lonardi reported that **“in the villages in the area we had visited, we had found a series of strange diseases with an unusual extremely high incidence with respect to the normal situation”**. The doctor stated also that he saw **“microcephalies and macrocephalies of which the frequency is so abnormal that you cannot find in any book (...) we couldn’t find any logical explanation for what we saw and we were constantly asking ourselves what is going on here”**<sup>16</sup>. Despite the fact that there has been so far no adequate research or even regular monitoring of the health condition of the individual households in Somalia, whereas perhaps most of the people don’t even see a doctor for years (either because there is no doctor altogether or it is too costly to get access to medical attention), the above mentioned examples, and many others that can’t be shared here because of space shortage, clearly indicate that there is strong evidence of the increasing toll of the hazardous toxic waste dumping in Somalia.

## **V. Concluding remarks**

The internationally-organized illegal and harmful practices to which Somalia has been subjected since 1990 are many including intensive, industry-scale IUU overfishing, arms - trafficking, international money laundering, bio-piracy as well as extensive dumping operations of extremely toxic and radioactive wastes. Specifically, this case study illustrates how a poor, conflict-ridden (hence unprotected) country, Somalia, has been exploited by international entities including companies and criminal organizations from industrialized countries by taking advantage of the long-running conflict and the political chaos. The findings draw on the available official reports released in the last two decades by specialized international agencies such as UNEP and Greenpeace as well as the first hand testimonies of the local and international medical doctors, international investigators, reliable media sources, magistrates, politicians and the toxic traffickers themselves. **From all these different sources, it is clear that Somalia has been turned into dumping ground for the worst toxic wastes produced in Europe and other industrialized countries at the expense of the already fragile health, livelihoods security, future prospect for development and the overall human security of the**

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<sup>16</sup> Translated by the author from Italian, these statements were quoted on RAINNEWS 24 (Italian Public Television), September 23, 2005

**affected population in Somalia. In addition, the combined negative effects of the closely related internationally-driven illegal practices such as the toxic waste dumping and the army smuggling on the Somali conflict are also clear.**

Bearing in mind the immense human suffering that all this dumping has caused in Somalia directly or indirectly, from the above **it can be concluded that the basic human rights of the affected Somali people have been systematically and perpetually violated including the right to life, the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, sufficient food and safe drinking water and the right to development.** Despite the gravity of this dimension of the Somali crisis, both the international community and Somalis ignore oftentimes these crucial issues while dealing with the Somali crisis. It is high time that these “forgotten” and internationally-driven dimensions of the Somali crisis and their devastating consequences for the life and livelihoods of the population must be taken into account and properly addressed.

## **VI. Recommendations**

To reverse the above described tragic trend, the author wishes to call upon the UN Council on Human Rights to take all necessary steps and actions to make sure that the interlinked problems of hazardous toxic waste, IUU fishing, army smuggling and all other internationally-driven dimensions of the Somali crisis are properly and comprehensively dealt with. Specifically, a number of concrete measures are recommended including:

1. The need for the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Human Rights Council on the adverse effects of the movement and dumping of toxic and dangerous products and wastes on the enjoyment of human rights to undertake a country mission in Somalia as soon as possible to assess the situation;
2. An in-depth and extensive field research to study the nature of the pollutants, full scale of the toxic wastes dumping in Somalia and the impact thereof on health, livelihoods and the natural environment;
3. Identification, isolation and reclamation of the polluted sites;

4. Full assessment of the hazards of these toxicants;
5. In line with the provisions of the international treaties, adoption of effective deterring legal and other coercive measures against the toxic traffickers at international level;
6. The need for both Somalis and the international stakeholders to recognize and take into proper account the (internationally-driven) war economy in Somalia and its implications while working towards durable solution;
7. Access to the existing information on the toxic waste dumping in Somalia is particularly crucial not only to find a lasting solution for these problems but also to mitigate the adverse effects of the hazardous toxic wastes. In this respect, those who have relevant information (e.g. individuals, national governments and international bodies) should share their knowledge urgently without reservation for there are communities and households who are living, in all likelihood, in or around the close vicinity of the polluted sites with serious consequences.