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Toxic Waste Dumping In Central America

by Deborah Tyroler

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According to the international environmental organization Greenpeace, more than 35 projects involving commercial use of toxic waste materials produced in Canada, the US and Europe have been proposed to Central American governments since 1986. [See CAU 10/11/91 for report on export of toxic waste to Central America.] Two of the proposals submitted to the Guatemalan government consisted of using toxic waste as fuel for electricity generation, a fuel to generate electricity, and to produce fertilizer. Another proposal suggested employing incinerator ash in home construction in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The waste materials in these three proposals incinerator ash, rubber and radioactive waste products contain or generate heavy metals and dioxin. Environmentalist Erzin Garzona said, "These substances can cause cancer and genetic defects, as well as damage to the human body's nervous and immune systems, and to the environment." Greenpeace activist Marta Pilon added, "It is difficult to identify the toxic materials because they are often disguised as other products in the regional markets." Greenpeace estimates that in the US 2 million metric tons of toxic waste are produced every minute, or 2.8 billion MT per day. About 1% of this waste material is exported to Latin America. In October 1991, the Guatemalan congress approved environmental protection legislation prohibiting entry of material banned in its country of origin. Belize and Costa Rica also have laws forbidding import and transit of all toxic waste. (Basic data from Inter Press Service, 12/18/91)

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