Breeding toxins from dead PCs
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Electronic wasteland

Breeding toxins from dead PCs

Children are dying to clear up the developed world's discarded computers

Richard Wray, communications editor
The Guardian, Tuesday 6 May 2008

Photograph: DanWatch and Consumers International

Thousands of discarded computers from western Europe and the US arrive in the ports of west Africa every day, ending up in massive toxic dumps where children burn and pull them apart to extract metals for cash.

The dumping of the developed world's electronic trash, or e-waste, is in direct contravention of international legislation and is causing serious health problems for inhabitants of the shanty towns that have sprung up amid the smouldering dumps in Lagos and Accra.

Campaigners believe unscrupulous scrap merchants are illegally dumping millions of tonnes of dangerous waste on the developing world under the guise of exporting it for use in schools and hospitals. They are calling for better policing of the ban on exports of e-waste, which can release lead, mercury and other dangerous chemicals.

"Ghana is increasingly becoming a dumping ground for waste from Europe and the US," according to Mike Anane, director of the League of Environmental Journalists in Ghana. "The people that break open these monitors tell me that they suffer from nausea, headaches and respiratory problems."

More than half a million computers arrive in Lagos every month but only about one in four works. The rest are sold as scrap, smashed up and burned.

"Millions of tons of e-waste disappears from the developed world every year and continues to reappear in developing countries, despite international bans," according to Luke Upchurch from Consumers International, which represents more than 220 consumer groups in 115 countries.