Global Ban on Exports of Toxic Waste Advances

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CARTAGENA, Colombia (AP) — More than 170 countries agreed Friday to accelerate adoption of a global ban on the export of hazardous wastes, including old electronics, to developing countries.

The environmental group Basel Action Network called the deal, which was brokered by Switzerland and Indonesia, a major breakthrough.

"I'm ecstatic," said its executive director, Jim Puckett. "I've been working on this since 1989 and it really does look like the shackles are lifted and we'll see this thing happen in my lifetime."

The deal seeks to ensure that developing countries no longer become dumping groups for toxic waste including industrial chemicals, discarded computers and cellphones and obsolete ships laden with asbestos, he said.

Delegates at the U.N. environmental conference in Cartagena agreed the ban should take effect as soon as 17 more countries ratify an amendment to the so-called 1989 Basel Convention.

"This agreement was stalled for the past 15 years," Colombia's environment minister, Frank Pearl, said in praising the vote.

Katharina Kummer, the convention's executive secretary, estimated it will take about five years to reach the required 68 ratifying nations. Puckett said he thought it would be closer to two years.

Fifty-one nations have already ratified the 1995 amendment, which effectively enforces the Basel Convention, a treaty aimed at making nations manage their waste at home rather than send it overseas.

The United States, the world's top exporter of electronic waste, is among nations that have not even ratified the original convention.

"Unless the U.S. joins the treaty they are just going to be a renegade," Puckett said, adding that the U.S. has no rules for exporting electronic waste, which it sends mostly to China but also to Africa and Latin America.

Phone messages left by The Associated Press for members of the U.S. delegation to the talks were not immediately returned.

The global ban has been strongly backed by African countries, China and the European Union, which already prohibits toxic exports and Puckett said Colombia played a strong role in Friday's breakthrough.

Opponents have been led by Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, and recently joined by India, said Puckett.

But in Cartagena, he said, Japan's position softened from 2008, when parties to the convention held their last meeting in Bali, Indonesia. It ended in a stalemate.

The issue took center stage in 2006 when hundreds of tons of waste were dumped around the Ivory Coast's main city of Abidjan, killing at least 10 people and sickening tens of thousands. The waste came from a tanker chartered by the Dutch commodities trading company Trafigura Beheer BV, which had contracted with a local company to dispose of the waste.

Puckett said shipping companies had opposed inclusion in the ban, wanting the keep sending old ships to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to scrap them.

"Just about four days ago another six people died on the beaches of Bangladesh," he said.

He told the AP there are no reliable estimates on how many tons of toxic waste are exported annually because developed nations don't accurately report them.

He said a private U.S. company will, for example, list them as "exports" in sending them to a developing nation so they can avoid paying taxes and other fees.

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal allows its 178 members to ban imports and requires exporters to gain consent before sending toxic materials abroad.

But critics say insufficient funds, widespread corruption and the absence of the United States as a participant have undermined the convention, leaving millions of poor people exposed to heavy metals, PCBs and other toxins.

They have long argued that an outright ban of exporting toxic waste is the only solution.

Frank Bajak contributed from Bogota, Colombia.

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