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NEWS

The damn dump: Who did it?

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Is Sri Lanka being turned into a dumping ground for possible toxic waste material and is someone at the Colombo Port taking dirty money to pollute the country? These questions arise in the aftermath of a controversy if not scandal over some 183 containers which were dumped in the Colombo Port by a dubious ship. Adding to the scandal the containers allegedly containing pesticide waste were suddenly moved out of the port without proper environmental safeguards and stored in a terminal at Sedawatte in Grandpass. Amidst a howl of protests from residents who complained that children were falling sick, a court ordered that the containers be removed from Sedawatte immediately and be taken back to the port.

But more than 48 hours after the court order the controversial containers are still at Sedawatte and none seems to be sure as to what the hell is happening.

As The Sunday Times investigators visited the scene at Sedawatte a strong smell emanated from the container yard a few kilometers away from Colombo. Some



of the children living around the area had been hospitalized after they showed signs of vomiting and headaches.

This was one of the signs that some of the contamina-

ted containers from the Colombo port had leaked out before proper examinations had been carried out on a controversial load of containers which had been unloaded at the Colombo port after the vessel had reported a fire and sought permission to call over at the port.

The first distress signal came from the ship, LT Grant, an Italian registered vessel on its way from China to Iran on February 13. They reported that the ship had developed a fire. The following day the ship was inspected by the Insurance agent and thereafter permission had been sought to call over at the Colombo Port.

After subsequent inspections by the Harbour Master and the Fire Brigade the ship was allowed into the

Port and it was detected that no fire had taken place, but a strong smell was emanating from the containers. Some of them had burn marks. Permission had been sought to unload some of the containers which were believed to have been burnt.

This has raised many questions about the permission granted to unload these containers and whether some of those contaminated containers were carrying pesticide waste. Some port workers say they were aware of moves to remove the contaminated cargo as well as political influence to get the containers removed to the container yard in Sedawatte.

The containers had begun to move out from the Co-

lombo Port before an inspection was carried out whether the cargo contained any environmentally hazardous items.

The Central Environmental Authority (CEA), reportedly was not informed and moved got into action almost a week after the controversial containers were out of the Colombo port, ignoring the possible health hazards.

It was the local police who first moved into action after the residents complained that children were falling ill, some of them vomiting, suffering from severe headaches and skin irritations. The residents said a strong smell was emanating from the adjoining container yard.

Police last Monday filed action in the Colombo Mag-

istrates court and the court ordered that some 184 containers removed from the Colombo port and stored at the container yard at Sedawatte be sent back to the port. But until Friday the containers had not been sent back.

On Friday moves were underway to take away the contaminated containers to an undisclosed location and chemically treat them.

But the controversy as to how the contaminated containers were removed from the Colombo port without proper environmental precautions has not been cleared.

Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) Vice Chairman, M.H.M. Salman said they were probing how the containers were removed from the harbour to a container

terminal outside the harbour.

Mr. Salman however defended the decision of the Port to allow the vessel to come in.

The Environmental Foundation Ltd, an environmental NGO was the other group which has taken up the issue and filed action in Courts.

Colombo's Additional Magistrate A.S. Gamlatharachchi who heard the case said the court had to intervene as there were signs that the containers were causing an environmental hazard.

The court has ordered a full investigation on the containers and directed the CEA, Government Analyst and the Atomic Energy Authority to report back to courts on Tuesday as to

Port and Ministry face storm

The Ports Ministry and the Ports Authority have come under heavy criticism from government and opposition politicians for their role in the current container controversy.

Environment Minister Rukman Senanayake took strong action and summoned a Parliamentary Select Committee meeting to discuss allegations that the Ports Authority had not taken necessary precautions before allowing the containers to be removed to a private container yard at Sedawatte.

The Minister said he would get Cabinet approval for a full scale probe as to why the ship was allowed to unload the dangerous or dubious cargo in the Colombo Port, what really happened on the ship, why the containers were removed to Sedawatte and other questions.

whether the containers contained contaminated waste and whether they were toxic.

Though the Ports Ministry appeared to be downplaying the incident, the Ministry of Environmental Affairs is taking a strong stand.

On Friday Environmental Minister Rukman Senanayake called a Select Committee meeting in Parliament to discuss the issue with CEA, Ports Authority and Customs officials. (See Separate story)

The exact contents of the containers are yet unknown though the Ports Ministry claims they contained Oxime Carbamate.

Chronology

Feb 13: -Deputy Local Representative of LT Grand Vessel informs the Sri Lanka Ports Authority about the fire aboard and asks permission for an anchor urgently.

Feb 14: -With permission the vessel anchors at the Colombo ports and is checked by a P&I insurance personnel.

Feb 15: -Harbour Master inspects the burnt area of the vessel.

Feb 16: -Fire Brigade brings the vessel back to harbour with a report stating that

there was no fire.

Feb 17: -Containers moved into Asian Terminals, Sedawatte, Nawalokapura.

Feb 24: -The Grandpas Police files a case at the Colombo Magistrates Court.

Feb 24: -The EFL files a case against the SLPA, Customs and CEA.

Feb 25: -64 containers moved back from the Asian Terminals to the Ports.

Feb 28: -Environment Minister Rukman Senanayake takes up the issue at the Parliament Select Committee.