**Hazardous waste challenge**

BY A L I T A U Q E E R S H E I K H 2023-05-04

PAKISTAN has become a free-for-all dumping ground for hazardous materials including chemicals, plastics, e-waste, and long-term pollutants.

The health of the Pakistani people and their physical environment is under siege: our water bodies, food chain, aquifers, and the air we breathe have all become carriers of toxic material and chemicals. Pakistan needs to pay greater attention to the implementation of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm conventions that together tackle the lifecycle of global chemicals and waste and their trade,transportation,storage andusage.

Collectively known as the BRS conventions, the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm conventions are multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) aimed at protecting human health and the environment from hazardous chemicals and wastes.

They provide a framework for the management of such substances. The BRS conventions are linked to climate change in many ways as they aim to tackle the crisis of pollution by avoiding ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss.

The Basel Convention focuses on the adverse effects of hazardous materials and waste by regulating their transboundary movement. Lured by substantial revenue, its illicit and unethical trade has trapped Pakistan in such unsafe and dangerous industries as shipbreaking and electronicwaste, by circumventing import rules or ignoring regulations. The imported waste is unregulated and poorly managed, allowing it to enter a person`s bloodstream, and lungs as well as the food chain through contamination.

The Rotterdam Convention is the only way to track a large number of hazardous chemicals such as chrysotile asbestos entering our borders and increasing the threat to human health and the environment. In negotiations, Pakistan imports asbestos from Kazakhstan and Russia and sides with these countries in opposing a complete ban on their trade. Both the Basil and Rotterdam conventions have left the door ajar for their global trade by relying on the prior informed consent procedure, something for which countries like Pakistan have a weak regulatory and governance environment.

The Stockholm Convention aims to protect human health and the environment from persistent chemicals such as DDT that remain active in the environment for extended, intergenerational periods. They often spread geographically and accumulate in the fatty tissues of humans andwildlife. Initially known as `the dirty dozen`, the number of persistent organic pollutants has now increased to 20.

We should also highlight two damaging practices that Pakistan needs to seriously curb and strongly regulate: e-waste: Pakistan`s growing e-waste market includes phones, televisions, computers, printers, monitors, sensors, CDs, DVDs and MP3 players, as well as hazardous waste such as oil, biomedical and healthcare waste, persistent organic pollutants, individual chemicals and compounds used as pesticides.

Until very recently, Gadiani was the world`s third largest ship-breaking yard exposing people, including children, to hazardous materials. Now Karachihas become the major location for e-waste dismantling and recycling. Secondary markets have also emerged in Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala and Peshawar in e-waste recycling, dismantling and refurbishment. Oddly, Pakistan gets e-waste also in the form of donations by charities or used items for resale and reuse.

Pakistan is among 15 nations where electronic e-waste dismantling and recycling is viewed as a significant risk. We annually import about 80,000 tonnes of bundled waste from hazardous waste reportedly from Australia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and UK. Pakistan generates an additional 13,500-plus tonnes of solid waste every day, mostly burned or dumped in open-air landfills.

Plastics: The accumulated plastic waste in the surface water is highly toxic and cannot be digested by the earth even over centuries, posing an intergenerational threat to the environment.

The Indus is the second most plastic-polluted river in the world, with Pakistan contributing 164,332 tonnes of plastic to the sea annually. Pakistan is home to some 6,000 plastic products manufacturers. Studies have indicated the presence of microplastics in the biota, water and sediment of the Manchhar, Haleji, Rawal and Kallar Kahar lakes, adversely affecting those who use the water for drinking and irrigation. It also affects fish and other aquatic creatures as well as migratory birds that travel from Siberia and other distant lands to our wetlands.

Even if signed decades ago for different purposes, the BRS conventions share common objectives. Since they started hosting joint meetings a decade ago, several institutional and policy linkages have evolved that help draw lessons to tackledifferent aspects of many of the same issues. They are not directly linked to the Paris Agreement.

The BRS conventions have a role in global environmental governance. In their joint meeting this week in Geneva from May 1-12, they are expected to identify possible synergies between existing mechanisms of the Paris Agreement and the BRS conventions.

Pakistan and other signatories of the Paris Agreement are required to submit their first biennial transparency and national inventory report.

It will include information on hazardous chemicals and wastes. The SLCPs, or short-lived climate pollutants, are mentioned in Pakistan`s revised Nationally Determined Contributions, but several others are not.

Non-compliance with MEAs can damage national credibility, and lead to trade-related barriers. The EU has begun to enforce a system of directives to ensure the implementation of MEAs and recently also introduced the controversial carbon border adjustment mechanism, or CBAM.

Despite coming up with the National Hazardous Waste Management Policy last year, Pakistan still lacks a robust regulatory regime. The inventories of chemicals present in the country are incomplete, and the associated regulations are absent.

The Ministry of Climate Change is responsible for ensuring the implementation and reporting of all MEAs, including BRS conventions. But the ministry has yet to devise credible implementation plans, streamline reporting systems, and agree on the coordinating mechanisms with the provinces, the private sector and other stakeholders. The trade and commerce ministry needs to be directly engaged in the negotiations and implementation of various MEAs, and help in ensuring compatibility between these agreements and the country`s environment-related trade policies.

The climate change ministry for years has not released the report on the state of environment nor the implementation status of the BRS conventions. Sadly, there is no parliamentary oversight committee for Pakistan`s international environmental agreements, not has this ever been made part of the agenda of the apex body, the National Climate Change Council. Here lies a window of opportunity for the present government to exercise its leadership.  The wnter is an expert on climate change and development.