

E-waste to hit developing world hard



Waste from discarded electronics will rise dramatically in the developing world within a decade, with computer waste in India alone to grow by 500 percent from 2007 levels by 2020, a U.N. study released Monday said.

E-waste--a term describing electronics including phones, printers, televisions, refrigerators and other appliances--grows globally by 40 million metric tones a year. Toxins are emitted when it is improperly burned by scavengers looking for valuable components, such as copper and gold.

A report released in Bali on Monday (PDF) by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) predicted that by 2020, e-waste from computers would grow by up to 400 percent from 2007 levels in China and South Africa.

"This report gives new urgency to establishing ambitious, formal and regulated processes for collecting and managing e-waste via the setting up of large, efficient facilities in China," said Achim Steiner, executive director of UNEP.

"China is not alone in facing a serious challenge. India, Brazil, Mexico and others may also face rising environmental damage and health problems if e-waste recycling is left to the vagaries of the informal sector," he said in the report.

The report, co-authored by EMPA of Switzerland, specialty materials group Umicore and the United Nations University, said that the United States is the biggest producer of e-waste, creating around 3 million metric tons a year.

Close behind is China, which produces around 2.3 million metric tons domestically and is where a lot of the developed world's e-waste is sent, EMPA said.

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EMPA is the research institute for material science and technology of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

The study predicted that mobile phone waste in China would be about seven times higher than 2007 levels by 2020, while in India it would be about 18 times higher.

The report advocated transporting some e-waste, such as circuit boards and batteries, from poorer countries to OECD-level countries better equipped to dispose of them properly.

Indonesian environment minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta said in a speech on Monday that Indonesia was vulnerable to illegal trafficking in hazardous waste.

Jim Puckett from the U.S.-based NGO Basel Action Network, which tracks illegal trafficking in e-waste, said Indonesian authorities recently discovered a shipment of nine 40-foot shipping containers of e-waste that had been sent from the U.S. state of Massachusetts.

"They were full of hand-stacked cathode ray tubes, computer monitors, basically. It was old junk that people wanted to get rid of because everyone wants flat-screens now," he said.

He said Indonesian authorities sent the shipment back.

If properly managed, though, e-waste represented a business opportunity, said Konrad Osterwalder, rector of the United Nations University.

"This report outlines smart new technologies and mechanisms which, combined with national and international policies, can transform waste into assets, creating new businesses with decent green jobs.

"In the process, countries can help cut pollution linked with mining and manufacturing, and with the disposal of old devices," he said.

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