

Pollution kills

A report from Israel that should serve as a warning to those who work in polluted waters

In Israel, industrial and municipal polluters are now accused of causing a cancer epidemic among fishermen and other workers of Kishon Fishing Harbour. On 14 June 2001, thirty-one fishermen, and fishermen's widows and orphans submitted a multi-million dollar civil lawsuit to a Haifa court. They accused six major petrochemical and chemical plants, including the Haifa Refinery, a fertilizer maker, Haifa Chemicals Ltd., and a municipal effluent purification plant for knowingly polluting, for at least two-and-a-half decades, the Kishon River, for many years biologically dead. The lawsuit also names some government agencies for neglecting enforcement of existing anti-pollution laws and regulations, and neglecting to warn the fishermen and other workers in the Kishon Fishing Harbour of the risk of exposure to its waters and fumes.

The lawyer acting on behalf of the fishermen prepared, with the help of a multi-disciplinary team of experts, a two-volume lawsuit that describes the man-made fishing harbour at the Kishon River estuary as a hydrological trap for the pollutants, and the Kishon River itself, or what's left of it, as the most polluted stream in Israel and one of the most polluted in the world. The lawsuit cites the plant's effluents as containing an array of highly concentrated carcinogenic heavy metals and organic compounds, some volatile. Some 30,000-75,000 cu m of the industrial and municipal effluents have been flowing daily into the lower Kishon during the two-and-a-half decades since the mid-1970s.

According to the epidemiological opinion included in the lawsuit, there is a statistically significant connection between this influx of pollutants and the conditions of work and of exposure to

carcinogens and the high cancer incidence (34-44 times that among the Israeli population at large) amongst the fishermen and other workers in the Kishon Fishing Harbour. Another medical opinion, of an environmental medicine specialist, places a very high probability for the association between the various types of cancer diagnosed and the pollutants present in the harbour's waters and sediment. In view of the lack of focused research, the synergetic effect of the various mixtures and chemical compounds that might have been created by the separate pollutants coming together in the extremely acidic environment is very hard to assess.

E. Fichman, the fishermen's lawyer, told a press conference that, while he was giving the last touches to the lawsuit, four more fishermen were diagnosed to have cancer and will later be added to the list of plaintiffs. "Each one here is walking with a time-bomb," said one fisherman. "We just don't know how soon they're going to kill us." Said another, "Sometimes I wish we were dolphins; at least, we would be getting plenty of publicity and public sympathy."

Among the plaintiffs are four members of the crew of a dredge, which used to be employed every couple of years, for a fortnight or so each time, to deepen the harbour and clear its entrance to the Kishon estuary of silt. This work required considerable contact with the heavily polluted sediments. Nobody ever warned the crew of any risk to their health. Today, however, three of them are already dead of cancer, while the last one is ill with it.

Military commission

The Kishon fishermen woke up only recently, after a military commission of inquiry, headed by a former president of

Israel's Supreme Court, had started investigating the alarmingly high rate of cancer among former naval commandos.

The one common reason for this epidemic was that they all exercised in the Kishon estuary, swimming and diving in its polluted waters. Capt. Moshe Raba, a retired fishing skipper, who, until recently, served as the president of Kishon fishermen's union, found out that there has been hardly any cancer-associated mortality among the fishermen in the other Israel harbours, Ashdod, Yaffo, and Acre, while almost every single Kishon fisherman who had died during the last 20 years had died of cancer. Then he found others who are ill with cancer, and yet others who fell ill, but shunned medical attention, and had to be persuaded to seek medical assistance and undergo tests, only to be diagnosed ill with cancer.

The fact that Kishon is heavily polluted with carcinogenic substances was well known, first, to the polluters themselves, then to the laboratories that performed occasional studies, to the Water Commissioner's office, whose legal duty was to deny water supply to polluting industries, to the Ministries of Health and of Environment, to the inter-municipal association for environment, as well as to several other institutions and green organizations. None of the above had done anything during all those years to

warn the fishermen and other workers in the Kishon Harbour of the risk involved with their working environment, in general, and with physical contact with Kishon's polluted air, water, and sediment, in particular. All worries expressed had to do with aquatic life, loss of Kishon River's aesthetic values, and the danger of polluted fish in the Haifa Bay, unfit for human consumption.

Israel has developed very fast since its establishment over 50 years ago. Before public opinion and government agencies became aware of the dangers of environmental pollution and habitat destruction, plenty of damage had already occurred. The plaintiff fishermen and their legal team hope not just for compensations, but also contributions to the struggle in Israel and other countries against development that ignores people's health. ❧

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