

ON FILTH AND FOREIGN POLICY

POLITICS | OCT 24 | BY NATHAN THORNBURGH



Wastewater from a mine

Environmental NGO's aren't known for their comedic timing, so I'm going to assume that Tuesday's release of a [Blacksmith Institute/Green Cross report](#) on the world's most polluted industries had nothing to do with the near-ludicrous foreign policy debate that took place between Obama and Romney the day before.

The contrast of the debate and the report, however, is worth contemplating.

First, the debate: much was made of Romney's apparent lockstep with Obama's vision (The Daily Show even [remixed it as a duet](#)). The sudden comity didn't just expose the sheer inconsistency of Romney's hot-and-cold political attacks, it also highlighted an uncomfortable fact: Obama's foreign policy is narrow, cynical, and threat-obsessed. Obama's record, or at least the record he is running on in this campaign, is something a GOP hawk could take real ownership of. It's DEFCON politics, a shallow attempt to paint the other man as insufficiently alarmed by our enemies, whether China, Iran, Libya, or even Russia.

Where does the Blacksmith report fit into this? Primarily as an example of what gets ignored in DEFCON politics: rational thought about real problems. It's not just that there are problems, but that "sometimes solutions are not so difficult," as Stephan Robinson of Green Cross Switzerland puts it.

Green Cross Switzerland and the U.S.-based Blacksmith Institute have been putting out this annual report together since 2007, but this is the first year they've tabulated pollution damage using the World Health Organization's wonky-but-useful DALY measurement. DALY stands for Disability Adjusted Life Years, and it's basically an expression of how many years people lose off their lives, either by early death or a poor quality of life. (As Jack Caravanos, a Professor of Environmental Health at Hunter College, put it, DALYs are the answer to the question "Why is that not everyone on the planet lives to 85?")

Extrapolating the data collected at 2600 contaminated sites in 49 countries, the authors estimate that 125 million people are at risk globally. That's 125 million men, women and children who live or work in close contact with mercury from gold mining, chromium from tanneries, lead from old car batteries. In total, the pollution costs up to 17 million Disability Adjusted Life Years worldwide. Coming by that number is, of course, an inexact science, but it does invite comparison between the impact of toxic pollution and some of the world's other great evils (none of which can be solved by drone attacks or suicide bombings, it should be noted). The shortlist of things that makes this a terrible planet

for the poor, according to their toll in Disability Adjusted Life Years:

HIV/AIDS — 28,933,000

Tuberculosis — 25,041,000

Industrial Pollutants — 17,147,600

Malaria — 14,252,000

So that's the headline, of sorts: toxic pollution causes more death and misery worldwide than malaria, though quite a bit less than HIV/AIDS.

The report lays out the ten biggest culprits among industries. And no, none of them are related to iPhones or FoxConn. In fact, most of them come from the kind of desperate small enterprise that define developing-world economies: ad-hoc mechanics who shake lead dust off of batteries, villagers who use mercury to mine for gold because it's the cheapest method. Here's the full list:

1. Lead-Acid Battery Recycling
2. Lead Smelting
3. Mining and Ore Processing
4. Tannery Operations
5. Industrial/Municipal Dump Sites
6. Industrial Estates
7. Artisanal Gold Mining
8. Product Manufacturing
9. Chemical Manufacturing
10. Dye Industry

Because these are decentralized, small industries creating products for local consumption, there's not much that external political pressure on developing countries can do. But the authors of the report say that there is a need—and an opportunity—for a global cleanup fund that could help these countries tackle the sites that Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross Switzerland have already surveyed. Cleanup is cheap in poorer countries, and even as little as \$50 million could have a big impact, say the authors of the report.

Or, in terms that our presidential candidates can understand, that \$50 million is equivalent to 0.7% of cost of the US Navy's proposed USS Zumwalt class destroyer, or the same cost as 16,000 horses, or 500,000 bayonets. By any calculation, worth the investment.