

WASTE PILING UP IN PLANTS FROM US TO AUSTRALIA

China's plastic waste ban throws global recycling into turmoil

AGENCIES

JENJAROM, APRIL 23

FROM GRUBBY packaging engulfing small Southeast Asian communities to waste piling up in plants from the US to Australia, China's ban on accepting the world's used plastic has plunged global recycling into turmoil.

For many years, China received the bulk of scrap plastic from around the world, processing much of it into a higher quality material that could be used by manufacturers.

But at the start of 2018, it closed its doors to almost all for-

eign plastic waste, as well as many other recyclables, in a push to protect the local environment and air quality, leaving developed nations struggling to find places to send their waste.

"It was like an earthquake," Arnaud Brunet, director general of Brussels-based industry group The Bureau of International Recycling, said.

"China was the biggest market for recyclables. It created a major shock in the global market." Instead, plastic is being redirected in huge quantities to Southeast Asia, where Chinese recyclers have shifted en masse.

With a large Chinese-speak-



A landfill in Bekasi, West Java province, Indonesia. Reuters

ing minority, Malaysia was a top choice for Chinese recyclers looking to relocate, and official

data showed plastic imports tripled from 2016 levels to 870,000 tonnes last year.

In the small town of Jenjarom, not far from Kuala Lumpur, plastic processing plants suddenly appeared in large numbers, pumping out noxious fumes day and night.

Huge mounds of plastic waste, dumped in the open, piled up as recyclers struggled to cope with the influx of packaging from everyday goods, such as foods and laundry detergents, from as far afield as Germany, the United States, and Brazil.

Residents soon noticed the acrid stench over the town — the kind of odour that is usual in processing plastic, but environmental campaigners believe some of

the fumes also come from the incineration of plastic waste that was too low quality to recycle.

"People were attacked by toxic fumes, waking them up at night. Many were coughing a lot," local resident, Pua Lay Peng, said.

Pua and other community members began investigating and by mid-2018 had located about 40 suspected processing plants, many of which appeared to be operating secretly and without proper permits.

Initial complaints went nowhere but they kept up pressure, and eventually the government took action. Authorities started closing down illegal facto-

ries in Jenjarom, and announced a nationwide temporary freeze on plastic import permits.

Thirty-three factories were closed down, although activists believe many have quietly moved elsewhere in the country. Residents say air quality has improved but plastic dumps remain.

In Australia, Europe and the US, many of those collecting plastic and other recyclables were left scrambling to find new places to send it. They face higher costs to get it processed by recyclers at home and in some cases have resorted to sending it to landfill sites as the scrap has piled up too quickly.

