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Tanzania is latest African country to ban cheap plastic bags

Shashank Bengali - McClatchy Newspapers

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ZANZIBAR, Tanzania --

ZANZIBAR, Tanzania—The fabled marketplaces of this East African island once lured traders from across the Indian Ocean with soft ivory, exotic spices and slaves. Now Zanzibar is taking a stand against a staple of modern-day commerce: the plastic bag.

Last month the nation of Tanzania, which includes semi-autonomous Zanzibar, banned cheap plastic bags, becoming the latest African country to crack down on what's increasingly seen as an environmental menace.

The flimsy polyethylene bags favored by merchants throughout Africa have a thickness of less than 30 microns—far weaker than the bags used in American supermarkets. Just a handful

of tomatoes or a couple of paperback books can easily rip through the bags, which then are just as easily tossed in the streets and bushes of towns and villages across the continent.

With no public trash collection or recycling in most of Africa, the bags' remnants clog gutters, stick in the mouths of animals and pollute waterways. Or, picked up by the wind, they catch in the branches of trees, where they flutter like tatty flowers.

In recent years, developing countries worldwide have been wrestling with the problem of the cheap bags—dubbed "African flowers" in South Africa and "white pollution" in China. Globally, more than 1 billion plastic bags are given out for free each day, according to the environmentalist Web site www.reusablebags.com.

The capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka, banned all polyethylene bags in 2002 after authorities said that devastating floods had been caused in part by plastic waste blocking drainage systems. A year later, South Africa imposed laws requiring merchants to hand out sturdier bags, which environmental officials said has helped cut the country's use of plastic bags in half.

Elsewhere in Africa, Rwanda, Eritrea and the self-declared Republic of Somaliland in northern Somalia have since instituted bans on the thinnest bags.

Tanzania's law is among the stiffest: Anyone caught importing or selling a bag thinner than 30 microns could face up to six months in jail and a fine of 1.5 million Tanzanian shillings, or about \$2,000.

"The place had become an eyesore," said Tanzania's environmental director, Eriki Kamoga Mugurusi. The bags "fly very easily and their use was widespread—almost every town, every city. The litter was conspicuous."

The ubiquitous thin black bags—about the width of Saran Wrap, but pierced by little more than a pinprick—can also unleash harmful chemicals like cadmium into the air when they are burned, a common method of trash disposal. Scientists say the material can take up to 1,000 years to degrade.

But the bags are so cheap that merchants hand them out freely, often double- and triple-bagging items like milk cartons and sacks of flour.

In Zanzibar, where tourism fuels the economy, the bags add to the problem of trash collection. Authorities can dispose of only a fraction of the 200 tons of trash produced daily, and Mugurusi said the banned bags still blighted the island's historic section, noted for its labyrinthine streets, coral stone architecture and intricately carved wooden doors.

"We still have the problem of clearing up the mess created by the banned plastic bags," Mugurusi said.

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