

PRESS RELEASE

Bhopal Victims Urge TN Govt to Clean up Kodai's Mercury Spill

6 April, 2012. CHENNAI – Victims of Union Carbide from Bhopal urged the Tamil Nadu Government to act decisively to get Hindustan Unilever to clean up the contamination within and outside its thermometer factory in Kodaikanal, and rehabilitate affected people and workers. At a meeting yesterday with State Environment Minister B.V. Ramanaa, Bhopal survivor leader Balkrishna Namdeo said “Tamil Nadu has a great opportunity and a danger – the danger of hosting a toxic legacy site like Bhopal for a few more decades, or the opportunity of developing a robust policy for environmental remediation that is science-based, participatory and makes the polluter pay.” The Bhopalis were joined by a child and ex-workers exposed to mercury pollution from Unilever's Kodaikanal factory.

Over the years, successive policy notes of the Tamil Nadu Government have failed to address the issue of remediation of contaminated industrial sites, such as Hindustan Unilever's mercury-tainted site in Kodaikanal or the Tamil Nadu Chromates' chromium-contaminated lands in Vellore. “This Government's proposed Environment Policy should deal with the role of public participation and science in environmental remediation of toxic sites,” said Dr. Usha Ramanathan, a New Delhi-based legal scholar. Dr. Ramanathan has worked extensively on worker safety and environmental laws post-Bhopal.

Eleven years after it was first brought to the Government's notice, the toxic mercury contamination caused by the illegal dumping of mercury wastes by Hindustan Unilever's thermometer factory is still waiting to be cleaned up. Several thousand tonnes of contaminated soil and material are lying in and around the factory site. Activists and Kodai residents say that “The Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board has shut out public oversight, and worked with the industry to dilute clean-up standards, instead of engaging in a transparent process to clean up the contaminated areas to international standards.”

They said TNPCB's closed door functioning was a departure from the TNPCB's engagement between 2001 and 2003 when the AIADMK was earlier in power. “During Ms. Jayalalithaa's last tenure as CM, the TNPCB involved local people and ex-workers and acted decisively. They shut down the errant plant within days of being informed of their violation. They made Unilever clean up one of several mercury dumps to international standards in the presence of villagers and NGOs. We want that transparent culture to return,” said S.A. Mahindra Babu who leads the ex-workers association.

Pointing to her mentally ill 12 year old son Nitish Kumar, Margaret Mary, an ex-worker, said “There are numerous children born to ex-workers who have serious mental and physical problems. The illnesses caused by mercury have devastated our family economies and driven us to destitution.” A plea for compensation and rehabilitation filed by affected workers is pending in the Madras High Court. The Association of ex-workers also said that they will submit a memorandum to the Government to include

rehabilitation of workers and communities affected by industrial pollution in the Environmental Policy note.

For more information, contact: Shweta Narayan. 8056024315

Community Environmental Monitoring

H16/9 Seevakan Street, Kalakshetra Colony

Besant Nagar, Chennai 600 090