

Gas leak in Mettur; 7 hospitalised

7 December, 2007, CHENNAI – A major leak of chlorine gas from Chemplast Sanmar's chloralkali plant in Mettur caused panic among workers and general public in the main road opposite the factory gate. According to Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board, the chlorine gas leak was caused by power failure in the factory at 11 a.m. Company sources are reported to have told the Board that the power was restored within three minutes. Chlorine levels in the online monitor on the factory tower registered a maximum of 4.9 parts per million, while the chlorine levels near the gate were 0.8 ppm.

Residents and commuters around the factory complained of a burning sensation in the eye, bloated stomach, giddiness and vomiting. Seven people were admitted in the General Hospital in Mettur; two others, including the chairman of Veerakalpudur Panchayat were treated as out-patients. Some people rushed to nearby private doctors and hospitals for treatment.

According to G. Anbazhagan, a software professional from Chennai, "I was at a phone booth right opposite Plant 3, when workers from the factory were running out with handkerchiefs tied around their faces. I immediately got a sharp and pungent smell. My eyes started burning; I had a vomiting sensation and had to sit down as I was feeling faint. My friend, Kalaiarasan, who was with me, vomited as well. He is more seriously affected because he ran towards the factory when the leak happened. Another friend of ours rushed the two of us to Dr. Ramakrishnan for first-aid. After 45 minutes, we were taken to the general hospital in the company's ambulance. Even now I have a bloated feeling in my stomach; I can smell chlorine every time I burp."

Chemplast Sanmar's Plant 3 manufactures Caustic soda and chlorine (using mercury cell process). Chemplast Sanmar has faced serious allegations in Mettur of exposing thousands of people from the local community to cocktails of poisonous and toxic chemicals.

On July 18th, 2004, a similar gas leak from Chemplast's Plant 3 led to the hospitalization of 26 people including a 22-day old child. More than 100 people were affected in that leak. No medical treatment or compensation was provided to any of those who were affected. The case was suppressed by the police and district administration. Residents fear that this incident too will be suppressed by the District Administration and police.

According to S. Satyamurthy, of a local farmer's organisation in Mettur, "There are frequent gas leaks from this factory, and some days we have to run when we see the gas cloud. There is no warning. The Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board and other authorities do not take any action against the company."

The 7 people who are admitted in the General Hospital are S.Satyamurthy(32), Rettaipuliamaram, D.Mani(50), Mottur, G.Anbuazhahan(28), Mottur, D.Vaithialingam(65), Subramanium Nagar, V.Kalaiarasan(33), Rettaipuliamaram, M.Thamaraiselvan(62), Rettaipuliamaram, and Selvaraj(24), Mottur. The 2 people treated in the G.H as out-patients are K.Tamilvaanan(33), Chairman of Veerakal Pudur Panchayat, Raman Nagar and I.Charles(47), Raman Nagar.

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