

People Condemn Govt. Nod to Chemplast's Poison Plastic Factory

7 December, 2005, CHENNAI, CUDDALORE -- Environmental and community groups have condemned the clearance granted by the Union Ministry of Environment & Forests to Chemplast Sanmar's controversial proposal to set up a PVC factory in SIPCOT Cuddalore. Cuddalore residents and environmental groups have said they will fight the proposal in the courts and in public fora. PVC is a poison plastic whose production, usage and disposal are associated with the release of a variety of life-threatening poisons including dioxins and furans.

The project clearance is illegal for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the decision was taken based on an outdated Environmental Impact Assessment prepared using 1999 data. The EIA is fundamentally flawed, and the project has several new components whose environmental impacts have neither been assessed nor understood. A desalination plant and a captive power plant have been added to the project. Both have significant environmental impacts, but neither have been assessed for their impacts, in violation of the EIA Notification, 1994. Additionally, the factory will use explosive and carcinogenic Vinyl Chloride Monomer (VCM) as raw material and will be located adjacent to a rocket fuel manufacturing facility. A mishap in one factory could snowball into a major disaster owing to the proximity of the two factories storing large quantities of explosive chemicals to residential areas.

The proposal was initially mooted in 2002. But the company relocated its proposal to Krishnapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, after Cuddalore residents expressed their opposition to the factory at a Government-held public hearing and forced one of the project financiers, the International Finance Corporation, to abandon the project. Krishnapatnam villagers too rejected Chemplast after a delegation visited Mettur to see first-hand the company's track record. Until late 2004, the company was unable to secure permission from the Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board. In April 2005, the project proposal was revived in Tamilnadu, and the Government granted it a "No Objection Certificate" without consulting with public despite the project's history of rejections by communities.

Chemplast is a major polluter with a poor track record of environmental compliance. In July 2005, the Indian People's Tribunal chaired by Justice (Retd) Akbar B. Kadri of the Madras High Court found the company's Mettur facilities guilty of discharging toxic effluents into the Kaveri, degrading several thousand acres of farmland, contaminating groundwater and affecting the health of villagers and workers.

The decisions by the State Government and the Ministry of Environment & Forests shows how all political parties are united when it comes to supporting corporations and ignoring the sentiments of local communities. Pollution-impacted villagers in Cuddalore have pleaded for a ban on the setting up of polluting factories in SIPCOT owing to the over-polluted nature of the industrial estate and its location within residential areas. Indeed, the State Human Rights Commission, the Indian People's Tribunal, leaders of various political parties including the PMK, MDMK, and the local DMK MLA Mr. Pugazhenthii have conveyed their opposition to the setting up of polluting units in SIPCOT. The factory has been approved despite resolutions against such units by the Panchayat and the Panchayat Union. However, rather than clean up the region and make it safe for residents, the Government has announced plans to relocate several more polluting units including dyeing and tanning units to SIPCOT Cuddalore.

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