

SIPCOT Area Community Environmental Monitoring

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Regulatory and Environmental Infrastructure Inadequate in SIPCOT – Report

Cuddalore, 29 July 2006:

SIPCOT Cuddalore is a regulatory black-hole, where industries are allowed to come up and operate without valid permits, according to a report released by the SIPCOT Area Community Environmental Monitors (SACEM). SACEM's first half-yearly report titled "Scorecard on Environment and Safety in SIPCOT Cuddalore" documents 20 major pollution incidents, instances of violations of the law, and workplace incidents involving environmental damage, and injury and death of workers in the six month period ending June 2006. At least 5 persons have been injured and three killed during the first half of 2006. The list of injured does not include fisherfolk who have experienced skin injuries/ailments as a result of river pollution. In the corresponding period last year from January to June 2005, SACEM recorded 24 major pollution and workplace incidents of a similar nature. SACEM is the only organization maintaining a comprehensive list of accidents and incidents in SIPCOT. Neither the Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) nor the Inspectorate of Factories maintains any such comprehensive list.

Releasing the report before a panel of experts at a public hearing in Cuddalore, SACEM representatives highlighted the neglect of the government authorities especially the TNPCB and Inspectorate of Factories in implementing the law in Cuddalore. "The Government has designated Cuddalore as the centre for all polluting industries. It plans to relocate Tirupur's polluting textile units to Cuddalore, and also build a PVC factory and a mega oil refinery. By doing so, it has declared that SIPCOT residents don't matter," SACEM said.

Criticizing the role of the Factories Inspectorate the report also claims that out of five incidents involving injuries to humans, three were workplace injuries. However, none of the victims got any compensation legally due to them. Compensations, if given, were ad-hoc payments completely irrelevant to the nature and extent of the injury. It is also not known if enquiries and actions required to be taken under the Factories Act were ever conducted for these incidences. The report highlights that companies like Tagros Chemicals and Pioneer Miyagi have gone ahead with construction without valid consent to establish.

SACEM has cautioned residents that the district administration and the Fire Department are completely unprepared to handle even a minor chemical accident. This was made clear during a fire in Coromandel Indag's abandoned factory in Pachaiyankuppam, where the firefighting operations were delayed by nearly four hours because the fire Department did not have the information it needed to choose the appropriate fire-extinguisher.

The report recommended that under these current circumstances, permitting more polluting units into Cuddalore – as contained in the proposals to set up a textile park, a PVC factory and an oil refinery – is only an invitation to a disaster of mammoth proportion.

The report was presented at a public hearing called by Cuddalore District Consumer Protection Organisation to highlight the plight of the residents of SIPCOT complex. The panel for the hearing comprised of Prof. S. Janakrajan of Madras Institute of Development Studies, Dr. Rakhal Gaithonde of Community Health Cell and Prof. Saraswati, former Head of Dept. of Sociology, Queens Mary College, Chennai.

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