

# Thai factory explosion kills 35 workers

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A large explosion at the Hong Thai Kaset Pattana fruit processing plant in Thailand on September 19 flattened the buildings, killing 35 workers and injuring over 100. More than 40 people are still unaccounted for. Two explosions ripped apart the factory complex near the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai and created a 30-metre wide crater. Bricks and large lumps of concrete were spread over a four-acre area. The blasts were caused by the ignition of a stock of the volatile chemical, potassium chlorate, illegally stored in the plant.

Debris landed over a mile from the plant, the roof of a nearby temple was blown off and houses in a one and a half-mile radius from the factory were damaged. A further disaster was only averted by seconds when firefighters extinguished flames around two 5,000-litre oil tanks in the factory grounds.

Buakham Boonma, who lost her 22-year-old son in the blast, said: "It couldn't happen to my son. I still don't believe it." He was working an overtime shift at the time of the explosion for which he was to be paid about \$US4. Her son was killed instantly along with his cousin. Mrs. Buakam was not able to claim the bodies at the hospital, as they could not be identified.

One villager, Somkuam Chitman, who lives over two kilometres from the factory, said: "I heard a big bang, windows and other glass in my house were shattered." Another villager, Somboon, who lives 500 metres from the plant, was injured. He said he was watching television when he heard an enormous noise. "The explosion was so deafening, it was if the sky had collapsed. Then a strong gust of wind blew into the living room through the shattered glass windows," he said. Motorists passing near the plant reported that their vehicles were lifted violently from the ground by the force of the blast.

According to one press report, 23 of those killed in the explosion came from the small village of Ban Dong

Lung. Most worked as casual labourers and were paid a meagre 100 baht (\$US2.50) a day.

The families of those killed or injured will get little in the way of compensation. The company, which has only been in operation since June, did not make any contributions to the Social Security Fund that covers compensation. Workers, whose injuries stop them from working for less than a year, will be paid 60 percent of their salary. Those who are permanently disabled will receive the equivalent of 50 percent of their salary for life plus 2,000 baht per month for medical expenses.

Police have said that up to 10 tonne of potassium chlorate was stored at the plant without a license. The chemical is extremely dangerous if not handled and stored correctly. It is highly explosive and is used in the manufacture of gunpowder and other explosives for fireworks, hand grenades, and landmines. It is flammable, combustible and highly unstable when mixed with substances such as sulphur.

Director General of the Pollution Control Department (PCD), Saksit Tridech, indicated that substantial amounts of sulphur and urea (containing ammonia) were detected at the plant. If safety precautions were followed, these chemicals would have been stored separately.

Boonthin Phuthachan, a 35-year-old worker, who was on leave at the time of the explosion, said he moved the chemicals from site to site but was never told what they were. The company described them only as "special chemicals".

The potassium chlorate was sold as fertiliser to the farmers who grew the lamyai or longan (a tropical fruit) in their orchards for the factory. The fruit was processed and packaged at the plant for export to China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Canada.

The farmers and the company only discovered that the potassium chlorate could be used as fertiliser by accident. Most of the farmers in the Chiang Mai district

are very poor and many supplement their income by making fireworks. To avoid the heat of the day, the farmers made the fireworks while sitting under their trees. After a few months they noticed the chemical residue caused their trees to bear fruit out of season. Most farmers in the district began applying potassium chlorate, which was stored and sold by the company.

The farmers used the chemical even though they knew it would only provide a short-term gain and would eventually poison their trees. But driven by extreme poverty, they were forced to take the risk, and still do in the aftermath of the explosion.

Khamun Chanchai, who cultivates 40 lamyai trees, said drought and poor yields had forced her to use the chemical. "It is better to try out new things than to die of hunger and debt," she said. Despite an increased crop, which she sold for 20 baht per kilogram, much of the money went to paying off village headmen and local politicians.

Police have issued arrest warrants for the Taiwanese company owner, Lee Hong Tien, who is thought to be in hiding in Hong Kong or Taiwan, and managing director Therdphan Chanrojsiri. Lee could face charges of negligence causing death, but is unlikely to return to Thailand.

While the company had obtained permission from the Defence Industry Department to store nearly 17 tonnes of potassium chlorate at a warehouse in the non-residential district of San Pathong, it later transported 10 tonnes of the chemical without official permission to its fruit processing plant.

The sale of the chemical has become a highly lucrative business for many fruit processing companies who buy it for 50 baht and then resell it for 300 baht. There are nearly 100 plants around Chiang Mai and many now use potassium chlorate. According to one media report, a government source said that lax control over the movement and storage of the chemical had turned the district into a "danger zone".

Following the explosion, more than 10 big lamyai processing plants in Chom Thong, Hot Mae Wang and San Pa Tong stopped operating. Residents in the Chom Thong market have demanded that the Top Star Agrochemicals company remove potassium chlorate that had been placed alongside urea and other fertilisers.

Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai has ordered checks on

all storage sites of potassium chlorate and ministers are proposing new measures to regulate the availability of the product. But left in the hands of the government, little is likely to change.

Thailand has an appalling industrial safety record. In 1992, the government-run Social Security Fund reported that there were 90,000 factory accidents and over 200,000 occupational injuries every year. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) published figures in the 1980s showing that deaths in Thai industry are 32 for every 100,000 workers per year, compared to Britain which has a rate of two per 100,000.

In 1993, the worst factory fire in history took place at the Kader Industrial Toy Co in Bangkok. The fire killed 188 workers and nearly 400 more were injured jumping from third and fourth floor windows. The plant, which manufactured toys for the major corporations Toys R Us, Hasbro and Tyco, had no fire extinguishers, fire escapes, alarms or the most elementary safety procedures.



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