

Sri Lanka:

Colombo residents demand halt to toxic pollution

G. Senaratne

29 November 2000

Residents of Ekala, an industrial suburb of the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, last month launched a protest campaign against hazardous environment pollution caused by chemical waste from a Union Carbide plant. Because of the campaign, the government's area Medical Health Officer commenced a court case against the company on November 13, but the case has been adjourned until July 22 next year, leaving residents anxious and furious.

On the night of October 16, Union Carbide's binding gum-producing factory discharged chemicals, including poisonous ethyl acrylate, into an open drain in the heavily-populated suburb, seriously harming at least 100 people, including 25 children. The discharge immediately sparked angry protests because residents have complained for five years about the dangerous pollution in Ekala, about 25 kilometres north of Colombo city.

The leak affected the water and air over a two-square kilometre area. Residents suddenly suffered sore eyes, headache, vomiting, breathing problems, choking and rising temperatures. Children were taken to nearby hospitals, with some serious cases transferred to Colombo's national hospital the next day.

More than 500 people gathered outside the factory during the night and demanded its immediate closure. Security officers admitted that the company, a subsidiary of the US multinational, had released contaminated water into the drain but claimed that the incident had ended. They refused to allow residents into the plant to see for themselves. However, the protest forced the local council to order the plant's temporary closure.

When the affected residents met the next morning at a small hall to discuss further steps, a leading local politician from the Peoples Alliance government led a mob assault on them. A gang of about 15 attacked the meeting with leather belts, batons and bottles. Those who fled were attacked with stones and some suffered leg injuries as they had tried to scale walls to escape.

At the adjoining battery plant, also owned by Union Carbide but renamed in the 1980s as the Eveready Battery factory, 135 workers stayed away from work for three days. They demanded medical certification that the chemical pollution would not affect their safety, but the company declined to give any undertaking.

Union Carbide went to court on November 3 to apply for the reopening of the plant. Faced with the opposition of the residents, the court was unable to grant the request. When the Medical Health Officer's case opened in the Negombo magistrates court on

November 13, residents again protested, fearing that the court would allow the plant to reopen.

In the hearing, Dr Azeez M. Mubarak, from the Industrial Technological Institute's chemical and environmental technological division, testified that at the end of October he had seen Ethyl Acrylate in a waste discharge tank, as well as in six barrels. Under questioning, Mubarak revealed that the government's Central Environmental Authority had not asked him to investigate how the discharge would affect residents.

The case was then postponed for nine months, however, and the court permitted the company to reopen the plant.

This is despite the fact that ethyl acrylate is known to be dangerous. According to the environment site EDF Chemical Scorecard (www.scorecard.org), the chemical has been recognised as carcinogenic, with suspected impacts on development, the gastrointestinal system, liver, kidney, the immune system, the brain, respiration, the skin and sensory organs.

People in the area related their experiences to the *World Socialist Web Site*. One resident said: "Toxic chemicals have been released twice or thrice a week in the middle of the night in small quantities, according to our knowledge. Even then, we could not bear the smell. On October 16, however, at about 7 in the evening we felt the same smell but more intensely."

W.A. Sunil, a father of two children, said: "While I was at home, suddenly I felt a smell. I looked everywhere in the house, thinking it might be an electrical short. Later my two kids complained about nose inflammation. My elder daughter complained of dizziness and pain in the eyes and she vomited. I lit some joss sticks, yet the smell was still there. The sickness lasted until 11 pm."

K. Kumudu Mangala Fernando told a similar story: "At about 8 pm my six-month-old baby started crying without opening his eyes. Later I came to know it was due to the pollution from the factory." As the baby's condition did not improve, she consulted a doctor and obtained treatment.

A mother living opposite the Union Carbide factory said her five-year-old son Eranga had previously suffered skin diseases from head to toe after playing with other children in a drain. Recently he suddenly fell from a chair and vomited after suffering with a constant headache. A specialist doctor had prescribed tests at a private hospital, but she was having difficulty finding 10,000 rupees (\$US125) to pay for the test. The mother said that many

other children are similarly affected.

Wimal Jayasinghe, whose 16-year-old son had to be admitted to the Colombo North hospital for a week, is a member of a group named the Alternative Organisation for Consumer Problems at Ekala. He provided some background: "Union Carbide has a waste treatment plant, but it was not used, leaving the wastes to flow into an open drain along the road, it seems. The drain was covered over within the company premises so as to prevent the ill effects coming into the plant.

"Union Carbide has been releasing poisonous chemicals for a long time, and so have other factories. Toxic materials have seeped into underground fountains, poisoning the drinking water drawn from wells. Doctors have pointed to the wastes as the cause for various diseases among local people. Some people left the area to protect their children. Despite our struggle for protection against the pollution, we have not had any remedy from government officials."

Union Carbide managing director Gamini Gunasekara, in an interview with the *Sunday Times*, has claimed that the discharge on October 16 was a mishap: "It happened... when a worker accidentally discharged ethyl acrylate to the waste treatment plant." Attempting to downplay the incident, he said it "could not be compared with the Bhopal tragedy, which was on a much larger scale".

On December 2, 1984, a poisonous chemical gas leak from the Union Carbide plant at Bhopal in India killed more than 2,000 men, women and children and seriously injured hundreds of thousands more, many of whom became blind or are still suffering from various ailments. Subsequent investigations exposed inadequate safety conditions inside the plant.

Despite Gunasekara's claim, the Ekala spill was not an isolated accident but part of a pattern of pollution with far-reaching effects. A Ministry of Planning and Implementation research report directly contradicts his explanation. "Because of the factories such as Union Carbide, contaminated water and chemical waste have been collected and the neighborhood has become a reddish marshy land," it states.

Another report indicates that serious changes have occurred in drinking water due to pollution from factories, including Union Carbide. Research conducted in 1993 under the Ministry of Housing Development on water samples taken from Ekala, found contamination up to 64 times higher than the permissible levels. In the same year, the Ceylon Institute of Scientific and Industrial Research also recorded high toxicity levels in the water over a wider area.

Research at the Medical Faculty of Kelaniya University has revealed that residents may suffer from mental illness, kidney failures and skin diseases for 20 years. Moreover, a team of doctors and nurses from Ragama Hospital—the major hospital in the area—examined 270 residents at the end of 1995 and concluded that: "Both children and adults living in the industrial zone seem to be at risk of respiratory disorders other than bronchial asthma. The occurrence of unexplained headaches is a new finding which needs further evaluation."

The Ekala industrial complex was inaugurated in 1963 in a densely populated area, with factories built just 10 or 15 metres

from houses. The drainage system for factory waste was built haphazardly through the housing area. Today there are 132,000 residents living alongside some 42 factories within the complex and 140 factories around it. Among them are 66 factories releasing liquid chemical wastes.

In Ekala one can see the ruined open drain, which runs along a busy road in front of Union Carbide, full of contaminated wastes. During the rainy season the drain spills over and floods toward homes. Because the well water is discoloured and foul-smelling, people have to walk about two kilometres looking for cleaner water. There are no official controls on deafening sounds and harmful dusts from the factories.

Union Carbide factory opened in early 1980s. The residents complain that it had been releasing chemical wastage into the Ekala village canal from its inception. They have also protested against companies such as the John Keels meat factory, Rhino Asbestos, Harcros Agrochemicals, Coco Lanka coconut milk producing plant, Lordstar Tyre and Melbourne Metal Iron for causing health problems. Residents have petitioned the government authorities but no one has given their complaints a hearing.

In 1995, four families filed a case against Lordstar Tyre, complaining of dust pollution. The court ordered a two-week closure but this was reversed on appeal. Later the families agreed to settle the case after the Central Environment Authority told the court that the company had adopted dust control methods. In 1997, however, the company sued the four families for 5 million rupees each for the losses it suffered during the closure. This case is still proceeding. Residents suspect that Union Carbide will resort to similar intimidation.

P.K. Somapala, chairman of the Environmental Protection Society, said: "People are fed up now with agitating to prevent damage caused by the industries since 1995. They have sent many letters to the Central Environmental Authority, Ja-Ela local council, Board of Investment (authority for free trade zones) and to the government. But to no avail."

The Sri Lankan Environmental Ministry and Central Environmental Authority have the legal power to enforce rules and regulations against the officially-acknowledged pollution at Ekala, but have consistently failed to do so. Instead they have worked to protect the transnational corporations and local companies whose only concern is profit.



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