

BP responsible for Papua New Guinea kerosene explosions

Will Marshall
8 March 2001

Five people were killed and at least 40 severely injured in a series of kerosene lamp and stove explosions on February 9 and 10 in eight villages scattered across the Madang Province of Papua New Guinea. Oil giant British Petroleum, whose outlets sold the contaminated kerosene, has accepted responsibility for the tragedy but many questions remain unanswered about the causes of the disaster and the response of the government and the company.

It is believed that about 6,000 litres of kerosene was mixed with petrol, producing a more volatile substance, which was then sold to villagers, who rely upon kerosene for lighting, cooking and heating. Lanterns and stoves exploded when lit, destroying several homes and at least part of one village. Those who died included three children and a pregnant woman along with her stillborn baby. Many of the survivors will suffer burn scars for life, some over most of their faces, legs and arms.

There were critical delays in both medical treatment and official reaction to the disaster. News of the explosions only began to emerge on February 14, when injured villagers began arriving in the provincial capital of Madang, on the north coast of PNG's mainland. By February 23, the death toll had reached five, when a seven-year-old boy died on arrival at Madang's Modilon Hospital. He had been treated at a poorly equipped health centre on the outskirts of Madang for a week prior to his death.

Facing mounting criticism and fearing legal action for compensation, BP hired a medical evacuation team on February 20 to fly seven severely burned victims, including three children and a pregnant woman to hospitals in Brisbane, Australia. Brisbane district hospital manager Dr John Menzies said the victims had suffered third-degree burns to up to 45 percent of their

bodies and were expected to remain in hospital for six weeks.

The next day, an editorial in the *National* newspaper commented: "That action is welcomed—but why has it taken more than a week and the death of three victims before it has been put into place? The fact is that all of these authorities and the company have clearly failed the people up to this point." The editorial described the reaction of government officials as "confused and tragically botched".

On the same day, February 21, the media reported that the Department of Labour and Employment (DLE) had discovered that all of BP's Madang operation facilities and other outlets in the province had been operating illegally, without the necessary safety and dangerous goods licences, for more than 12 months. Ten days after the explosions, the DLE ordered the indefinite closure of all BP facilities and depots in the province.

In a letter to BP, DLE official Kuki Ora cited non-compliance with Industrial Safety, Health and Welfare Act Chapter 175 and the Inflammable Liquid Act Chapter 311. Under these provisions, the DLE is responsible for not only issuing licenses to trade in inflammable substances but also for making regular checks of licensed premises. Both Acts allow inspectors to gain access to any premises and carry out an examination of all safety procedures, dangerous substances, etc.

BP's initial response was to dismiss the lack of licenses as merely "an administrative oversight". Company spokesman Neil McMaster declared: "It had absolutely nothing to do with the fuel contamination." On February 21, BP denied it had breached any industrial safety legislation and announced its own investigation into how the contamination occurred.

McMaster made it clear that the company expected the authorities to swiftly exonerate the company. “We tested the depot and there was no contamination there,” he announced without waiting for any official inquiry. “We expect our licence to be renewed.”

BP claimed that it would present the findings of its investigation to the authorities by last week, but no results have been issued to the public. Nevertheless, the authorities have expressed satisfaction with the information being supplied to them by BP. Consumer Affairs Council chief executive officer Dan Kakarya disclosed that: “We are also in constant contact with the general manager of BP (PNG) who has been very cooperative in providing us with up-to-date information on the whole situation.”

While not releasing any explanation of how the contamination occurred, BP has insisted that the problem is confined to Madang and that there is no need for precautionary measures elsewhere in PNG. The company has also emphasised that it is paying for the medical expenses, food, shelter and clothing, as well as the lost possessions of victims. These efforts appear designed to avert damages actions that, as the *National* editorial suggested, could total millions of dollars.

The PNG government has said virtually nothing about BP's culpability. Without offering emergency aid itself, the government has left the victims to deal with BP themselves. Foreign Minister Bart Philemon stated: “I would assume that there would be individual family members that would probably pursue compensation. We'll wait and see what develops between the families themselves and BP.”

BP faces a miniscule fine of 100 kina (about \$US30) for not complying with the Industrial Safety Act. According to its own figures, BP had a market capitalisation of some \$208 billion in 1999. After extracting profits from PNG for decades, the company has begun to scale down its operations in the country, selling off its upstream oil and gas assets in 1998 for \$400 million. It now operates as a distributor with 13 depots and 22 petrol stations across PNG.

The ability of corporations like BP to flout basic safety regulations along with the government's submissive response reveal a callous indifference on the part of both to the lives and wellbeing of ordinary working people—in this case, villagers living in

difficult, primitive conditions. This subservience to the interests of profit above all else only ensures similar tragedies will take place again in the future.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact