

Massive fire at Chinese chemical factory

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An explosion at a chemical factory in China on Monday evening caused a large scale fire and a number of injuries. Industrial accidents in China are a regular occurrence amid the drive by corporations, with government backing, to boost profits at the expense of occupational safety, health and environmental standards.

The explosion occurred at a paraxylene (PX) chemical plant in the city of Zhangzhou in Fujian province. Paraxylene is a highly flammable chemical used in making polyethylene terephthalate (PET) polyesters that can be formed into a variety of items including water bottles and clothing fabrics. Paraxylene is also found in small amounts in airplane fuel and gasoline. It causes dizziness and nausea if ingested and can damage the central nervous system.

Monday's explosion is thought to have been caused by leaking xylene, ignited by a spark. After the initial explosion, three oil tanks also caught fire, intensifying the blaze. At the time of the fire, the plant was not in operation, having been shut down for maintenance.

The fire raged into Tuesday and required more than 800 firefighters to extinguish. Nineteen people, including four firefighters, were injured and treated in hospital. Two oil storage tanks caught fire again on Wednesday but have since been put out.

The blast from the plant was reportedly felt 50 kilometers away. The government claims that the surrounding area has not been contaminated by chemicals from the plant. However, 29,096 residents who live near the plant have been evacuated, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency. This is the second explosion at the Zhangzhou plant in two years.

The first explosion occurred in July 2013, just days before the plant was first scheduled to begin production. A hydrogen pipeline ruptured during testing, delaying the opening of the plant by a week. No injuries were reported at the time. However, the fact

that a second explosion has occurred in a relatively short time indicates that safety standards are being ignored.

The plant is operated by Dragon Aromatics, a branch of the Taiwanese petrochemical company Xianglu Group. Dragon Aromatics is one of China's largest independent petrochemical producers. It produces liquefied petroleum gas and naphtha (a product similar to gasoline) working in collaboration with the Chinese military-linked company Zhuhai Zhenrong.

The public is highly suspicious of PX plants. The planned construction of another PX plant was the focus of protests by thousands of people in March and April last year in Maoming, located in neighboring Guangdong Province. Police broke up the protests with tear gas and batons, leading to injuries among the demonstrators.

One Maoming resident summed up the attitude of the government and plant management: "Maoming has always been a chemical industrial city. Sometimes walking on the streets, you can't even escape from the awful smell discharged from the chemical plants." Residents living near the Zhangzhou plant also complained of chemical smells.

Protests in 2007 against the original plans to build a PX plant in the wealthier neighborhood of Xiamen succeeded in blocking its construction and having it moved to Zhangzhou where it was built in the poorer area of Gulei.

Public opposition has also halted plans to construct other PX plants, including in the cities of Dalian, Ningbo and Kunming.

The explosion became a hot topic on Weibo, a Chinese web site similar to Twitter. Many people expressed their opposition to PX plants, stating that past protests had been correct to take a stand against the factories. Frustrated by the government's claims that the plants are safe, one user commented, "Only when

the city officials and their families live near a PX plant will their assurances be convincing.”

Ma Jun, a Chinese environmentalist, stated: “[Monday’s explosion] will refocus the debate on the quality of decision making as well as the management of the chemicals industry.” However, nothing of the sort will occur. The routine official response to industrial accidents is to make phony promises to improve safety to placate public anger and remove a few local government officials, making them the scapegoat for the systematic lack of industrial safety.

Many accidents go underreported or escape notice altogether. For example, it was revealed at the end of December that an explosion at an auto parts factory in Kunshan, Jiangsu province in August, that was thought to have caused 75 deaths, actually killed 146 people. The August explosion was the worst in 2014, but not the only one. Another blast killed 17 workers and injured 20 at an auto parts factory in Foshan, Guangdong province on December 31, just hours after the government acknowledged the larger death toll at Kunshan.

Last year, according to the government’s National Bureau of Statistics, there were 68,061 workplace deaths in China. This huge death toll number makes a mockery of claims by big business and its defenders in the Beijing bureaucracy that there will be a greater focus on safety in the future.



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