

# Five die after exposure to ammonia gas at Sri Lankan latex factory

Our reporters  
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Two workers and three local residents died on April 19 when they were exposed to ammonia gas at a latex rubber factory in Ballapitiya village, Horana, 25 kilometres from Colombo. Around 15 others were also hospitalised after inhaling the toxic fumes.

Workers and villagers told WSWs reporters that no proper safety measures were in place at the plant.

The factory, owned by S and C Latex (Private) Limited, employs about 70 workers. It prepares products for Bettans Kids, a well-known brand in South Asia.

W. Ariyapala, a 40-year-old worker who was cleaning waste from a waste tank, lost consciousness after being exposed to ammonia effluent. He fell into the tank at around 1 p.m. Eyewitnesses said Waruna Chandrasekara, a 33-year-old supervisor at the factory who rushed to Ariyapala's aid, also collapsed and fell into the tank.

After hearing workers shout for help, Priyanatha Kumara (43), Dilip Lokupathirage (31) and Lal Pushpakumara (28) and others attempted to assist but also fell into the tank.

After breaking the cover above the tank and letting the gas disperse, local residents were able to take the victims out. All of them, however, had died.

Workers and neighbours said the factory management, including the plant's owner Sarath Wijeratne, were in the premises at the time, but did nothing to rescue the victims. As villagers expressed their anger, Wijeratne fled the scene.

Residents said the management did not even provide a vehicle for the victims, instead calling police to protect the factory. Neighbours took the victims to the hospital with the assistance of passing vehicles.

Sriya Hettiarachchi, a woman from the village, told WSWs reporters that the factory began operations 20

years ago on government land, producing rubber sheets. A shoe plant was later established at the site.

"We find it very difficult to live due to this factory," Hettiarachchi said. "There is always a bad smell. Only after it had begun did we know that the smell was due to ammonia. It is just now that we have found out how harmful it is."

Hettiarachchi said waste water from the factory was previously released into a nearby stream that flows about a kilometre to the Kalu Ganga River. "Paddy fields of about 50 acres which are cultivated using the water of that stream became infertile because of this," she said. "Even animals died. Then villagers held a protest. Later the factory was stopped from dumping waste water by the Environmental Authority. However, I have heard that unclean water was later released to another area using pipelines."

Roshan Rajapakse, a young villager, said Wijeratne is a former army brigadier and had also held a high position in the Central Environmental Authority. "He has direct government backing," he said. "Wijeratne has a close relationship with former President Mahinda Rajapakse and the late Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake. Yositha Rajapakse, a son of Mahinda Rajapakse, came to religious festivals at the factory."

Roshan Rajapakse continued: "If any person opposed the factory over an environmental issue, Wijeratne would go to court saying he had been threatened with death, or he would concoct another charge. Not only small people like us, but also regional politicians, cannot oppose him."

Workers denounced the slave-labour conditions in the factory. They said three female employees who reported for work on April 19, after traditional New Year holidays, were summarily sacked without any compensation. Their "crime" was not reporting for

work on April 17 after the holidays, as the factory had ordered. The three women also have been denied access to their pension fund and employees' provident fund.

Shiromi Kodagoda, one of the sacked workers in the shoe production section, said: "We only take this kind of leave on the Sinhala New Year after working hard all year. I informed the office that I would be unable to work on April 17. I have two children. We live in very difficult conditions even though we have had my salary and my husband's earnings. The sudden loss of job is a severe problem."

A shoe production worker, Hasitha Dilranga, said: "I work here because I have no other job. My monthly salary is 20,000 rupees [\$US127]. In my section there is unbearable heat. We don't get any extra payment for working in such conditions. There is no safety equipment for this type of accident. We were not even informed that there was toxic gas produced here."

Dilranga said older women were employed for even more labour-intensive work in the rubber production section. "From acid mixing, to cleaning rubber milk and transporting lorries; it's all carried out by women who are old enough to be our mothers. I feel sad and angry when I see them cleaning lorries without gloves," he said.

Dilranga said women workers were employed because they are paid less. "They work under back-breaking conditions due to poverty," he said.

Many workers said there were not even minimal safety measures in the factory. "There was not even a rope to drag out those who fell into the tank," one said. "Nor were there any oxygen tanks. Every place with an ammonia tank should be registered with the fire brigade, but that did not happen here."

All the residents who died lived in the nearby Akkara Thispaha (Thirty Five Acre) village. People were waiting for their bodies when WSWs reporters visited the village. Residents spoke about pain they felt over the loss of their neighbours and their anger toward the factory management.

Saratha Kumara, who works at the water board, said: "How many times have we written to the authorities? How many times did we hold demonstrations? How many times did we appeal to governments to stop this environmental pollution? Nothing has happened. They don't care about our lives. Factory owners, government ministers, environmental officials are all on the same

side.

"We had to wait for a long time to take patients to the hospital after the accident. But about 50 police officers from the special task force came to protect the factory within half an hour. All of them work against us."

Government authorities are seeking to obscure their own responsibility for the accident, amid growing anger.

Western Province Chief Minister Isura Devapriya, who visited the factory, called on the Central Environment Authority to permanently close the plant. He said nothing about the fate of the workers in the event of a shutdown.

The Labour Department declared it will take legal action against the factory, but did not explain why it allowed the factory owners to violate safety practices. In reality, these conditions are the result of policies implemented by successive governments, including the present administration of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Employing casual and contract workers in factories is rampant throughout Sri Lanka. This is aimed at extracting maximum profits via meagre wages and minimum, unsafe working conditions.

In March alone, two similar accidents were reported. Two workers died inhaling toxic gas at a Bio Foods Company plant located near Dambulla, 140 kilometres from Colombo. Around 100 workers at a Polytex Garments in Jaala- Ekala, outside Colombo, were hospitalised after being exposed to toxic substances.

Such factories are set up outside the major cities and towns to exploit the labour of rural youth. International chains such as Bettans and retail garment giants earn huge profits on the back of these conditions throughout South Asia and around the world.

Over recent decades, the number of industrial accidents in South Asia has grown dramatically. Some 1,134 workers died in the Rana Plaza factory disaster in Bangladesh in 2013. In India, the number of deaths due to industrial accidents has increased to around 48,000 per year.



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