

India: Toxic gas leak in Visakhapatnam kills 11 people and puts thousands in danger

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Eleven people died and around 800 were hospitalised by a poisonous gas leak early Thursday morning at an LG Polymers India plant in Visakhapatnam, a port city in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The company is owned by South Korean-based LG Chem.

The majority of victims, including two children, were from the Gopalapatnam area near the chemical plant. Eight people died after inhaling large amounts of toxic styrene gas while three others were killed in accidents as they tried to escape the area. Around 15,000 people have now been evacuated from affected villages.

The leak began at about 2.30 a.m. as employees were about to resume work at the plant following the Modi government's easing of some COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. When police reached the area they found residents who live near the plant unconscious on their beds. Shocking television footage showed unconscious people in backyards and others collapsed in narrow streets as they tried to escape. The residents reported eye irritation, breathlessness, nausea and skin rashes.

Some of those who tried to drive away became unconscious in their vehicles and crashed. One motorcyclist collapsed and drove into a ditch, tragically killing both himself and a pillion passenger. Two people became so dizzy from the gas that they collapsed into a well and died while one woman fell off the second floor of her building. Video footage showed parents running up and down streets carrying their breathless children and people collapsing on roads.

The terrifying pictures are reminiscent of the 1984 Bhopal tragedy in Madhya Pradesh state when thousands were killed by a gas leak at a Union Carbide plant, the worst industrial accident in history. More than 40 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas and other unknown poisons used in the manufacture of pesticides were released from the US multinational owned

facility, turning the plant and surrounding areas into a virtual gas chamber.

Thursday's toxic gas disaster at Visakhapatnam has again revealed the criminal negligence of the Indian ruling elite. The poisonous gas spread in a three-kilometre circle from the original source and was not closed off for four hours after the leak it began.

An official statement from LG Polymers India plant indicated that management was fully aware there could be a disaster. "[S]tagnation and changes in temperature," it said, "could have resulted in auto polymerization which could have caused vaporization."

The Vishakhapatnam gas leak, in fact, is just one of many thousands of examples of major capitalist corporations determined to maintain their dangerous production processes irrespective of the consequences for the lives of their workers and the impact on neighbouring communities. It has also revealed the widespread practice by factory managers of using hazardous and dilapidated machinery to maintain production and maximize profits.

Investigators told the media that gas pressure may have built up during the national COVID-19 lockdown; the temperature of the styrene was not maintained at less than 20 degrees because of failed refrigerants, and a wrecked valve, or a burst pipe, could have caused the leak.

Thursday's disaster occurred as the Modi government was telling state governments and district authorities to begin lifting the lockdown, pushing millions into a premature return to work, even as COVID-19 cases and deaths continue to rise.

In a perfunctory and utterly routine statement, Modi tweeted: "Spoke to officials of MHA [Ministry of Home Affairs] and NDMA [National Disaster Management Authority] regarding the situation in

Visakhapatnam, which is being monitored closely. I pray for everyone's safety and well-being in Visakhapatnam."

Modi's real concern is not the lives of the victims but that the gas leak disaster will undermine the government's demand that workers should return to their jobs.

Notwithstanding phony rhetoric about the "safety and well-being" of gas leak victims, India is one of the most dangerous places in the world to work.

According to Labour and Employment Ministry data, 3,562 workers died in factory accidents in India between 2014 and 2016 and more than 51,000 were injured in the same period—an average of three deaths and 47 injuries every single day. A 2017 study by the British Safety Council painted an even bleaker picture, reporting that 48,000 workers die of occupational accidents in India every year.

The Bhopal disaster, however, remains India's worst industrial accident with 8,000 immediate fatalities and the hospitalization of some 170,000 residents. The total number of deaths from the accident is estimated to have been between 16,000 and 30,000. Thousands of survivors continue to suffer health problems.

More than 15 years after the event, around 150,000 people were still chronically ill and suffering from a range of health problems, including breathing difficulties, persistent coughs, ulcerations of the cornea, early-age cataracts, recurrent fevers, burning of the skin and depression from the tragedy. An estimated 10 to 15 Bhopal disaster victims still die every month.

The Visakhapatnam gas leak is a warning to all workers returning to inactive plants and badly maintained machinery shut down during the COVID-19 lockdown. These dangers were further confirmed by a similar gas leak at a paper mill in Chhattisgarh, hours before the Visakhapatnam incident. Up to seven workers at the paper mill were hospitalised after being exposed to toxic gases while they were cleaning the paper pulp tank in preparation for a resumption of operations at the facility.

Successive Indian governments have worked to transform the country into a cheap labor haven for giant multinational corporations and international investors, who have sabotaged workers' health and safety conditions whilst reaping billions in profits.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy

responded to Thursday's disaster by awarding 10 million rupees (\$US133,000) to the families of those who died and a meagre 100,000 rupees (\$1,330) for those injured. This will do nothing to alleviate the loss of lives and prolonged suffering of those exposed to the toxic gas.

Andhra Pradesh Industries Minister Mekapati Goutham Reddy blandly described the gas leak as an "industrial failure" by the company. "It's for the company to prove that there was no negligence on its part," he declared.

Reddy's statement is empty posturing. If the response of India's ruling elite to the Bhopal disaster is anything to go by, nothing will happen to LG Polymers India.

In 2010, amid widespread public anger and disgust over the 1984 Bhopal disaster, an Indian district court ordered eight executives of Union Carbide to be sentenced to just two years' jail. They were fined a meagre 100,000 rupees (\$US2,100) each and the company just 500,000 rupees (\$US10,600), with the American CEO of the company remaining an "absconder" until his death. The giant US multinational corporation effectively went scot free for a mass murder.



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