

TOXIC DISASTER: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON VISAKHAPATNAM GAS LEAK

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The [disastrous leak of a toxic chemical](#) that has killed several people and left hundreds sick near Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh comes as a shock to a nation struggling to cope with a prolonged lockdown. Residents of habitations around Gopalapatnam, close to the site where the LG Polymers plant is located, passed out as the hazardous [styrene vapour swept through the area](#) at night. Several deaths took place as people tried to flee, and the chemical rendered them unconscious. There are horrific stories of people falling from buildings, or into wells and ditches as they lost consciousness. They have become the first victims of the exit from the lockdown, when industrial units were allowed to resume their operations. [Styrene](#), the chemical involved in the disaster-struck plant that produces polystyrene products, is included in the schedule of the Manufacture, Storage and Import of Hazardous Chemical Rules, 1989. The rules lay down strict norms on how it should be handled and stored. Although it will take an inquiry to establish what caused the incident, the company and the State government knew that the chemical was hazardous, characterised by poor stability under a variety of conditions that could even lead to explosive situations. It is also reasonable to assume that the safety mechanism built into the storage structures of something so hazardous was either faulty or allowed to be overridden. Was the reopening work at the factory left to unskilled people, as some city officials have said? These aspects must be probed in the inquiry to fix accountability.

The Andhra Pradesh government must focus immediately on the medical needs of those who have been grievously affected by the gas leak, which has inevitably led to comparisons with the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster. As a harmful chemical, styrene could have chronic effects beyond the immediate symptoms. International safety literature cites it as a substance that may cause cancer; there is thus no safe limit for exposure to it. Solatium payments and compensation for the victims and families are important, but so is access to the highest quality of health care for the victims. What happened in Gopalapatnam is also a warning for industries across India. Although some may see the incident as a consequence of the lockdown, the States have the authority under the Central government's orders to exempt process industries. It needs no special emphasis that safety of industrial chemicals requires continuous watch, with no scope for waivers. As India aims for a wider manufacturing base, it needs to strengthen its approach to public and occupational safety. Transparent oversight is not a hurdle to industrial growth. It advances sustainable development by eliminating terrible mistakes.

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