

OILWATCH ALERT

SOUTH AFRICA 2004

1. PRESS RELEASE ON LOCAL SCHOOL BEING GASSED OUT AS LEARNERS AND EDUCATORS ARE SENT TO HOSPITAL FOR FURTHER TESTS

Today, Thursday 4th March 2004 at 12:45pm learners and educators at the Settlers Primary School, Merebank, as well as local residents were gassed out yet again. This occurred after a huge toxic release from the **Engen** refinery, from all stacks. The flare was visible from 10 kilometers away, near the city centre.

Numerous complaints were logged at the eThekweni Emergency Services, as well as the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) offices. On arrival at the scene, SDCEA members saw numerous casualties, including educators; learners and local residents treated by local paramedics (KZN Emergency Rescue Services). Metro fire and eThekweni Health Department was also at the scene.

At least seven KZN rescue vehicles were on the scene, as well as a medical doctor, Dr Yusuf Asmal, from the KZN Emergency Services, who was summoned and then examined and stabilized all casualties. He further instructed that all casualties be sent to hospital. Senior Engen management at the scene agreed to pay for the medical bills.

In total, at least 24 people were treated and six were sent to hospital for further tests and observation. As this gassing took place late in the school day, a number of learners left for home, before they were treated. This will probably result in a high absentee rate tomorrow, as a reaction may set in later today.

This comes on top of the scientific health study conducted by the Nelson Mandela Medical School, together with the University of Michigan which proved that Engen, SAPREF and Mondi are the highest polluters. According to the study, 52% of the learners and educators are currently affected with asthma and 26% have persistent asthma, and both these figures are higher than international norms. Qualitative teaching time is going to be lost for both educators and learners on account of this gassing. This is not the first time, neither will it be the last, as some city officials at the scene do not believe that the refineries are responsible. Maybe when a learner or educator dies on account of these incidents, we will see action.

We are calling on the Minister of Education, as well as the MEC to visit the school and take serious action on the polluter. We are also calling for corporate accountability, and communities are calling for investigations to be conducted, and those responsible should be criminally charged. Minister Dumisani Makhaye disappointed communities on a recent visit by not taking action on the

Engen refinery for a spill into the Stanvac canal. Multi-national industries have admitted to major oil leaks into the Durban Harbour, and yet there has been no prosecution. We are tired of cancer, leukemia and asthma – the time for action is now! Or are the Green Scorpions actually chameleons?

For further comment, please contact Des D'Sa 083 982 6939 or contact the SDCEA offices on 031- 461 1991

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