

Yet another lapse of industrial safety

So soon after the gas leak tragedy at the LG Chem plant at Vizag there is yet another tragic accident: the leakage of gas and the subsequent fire at Oil India's Baghjan well in Assam. The fire has not been put out yet nor the gas leak arrested. National and international experts are battling with the problem.

POST COVID-19 has seen an increasing trend of reported safety incidents across the country. These include LG Chem, Galaxy Surfactants, Neyveli Lignite... Adding to that list is now the massive fire in Baghjan-V well in Tinsukia district of Assam. Given the strategic importance of the oil and gas exploration in fulfilling the energy requirements and consequences of the environmental and social impacts, these kinds of incidents are ill-affordable. A similar accident occurred in 2005 at Dibrugarh district, Assam. It took about 45 days to control.

The Baghjan-V well belongs to Oil India Ltd (OIL) and is situated next to Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. It is said to produce 1 lakh standard cubic metre per day of gas and was undergoing work-over operations to produce gas from a new strand when the blow-out happened on 27 May 2020.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS JOINED EFFORT...

It was decided to take the help of international experts; team from Singapore was rushed to assist in arresting the blow-out. As the company was mobilising equipment and machinery to contain the blow-out, on 9 June, twelve days after the initial blow-out, a massive fire erupted. While the authorities have initiated investigation, the source of igni-

tion and the cause of the blow-out are still unclear.

It might take as long as four weeks after the fire is contained to plug the blow-out.

IMMEDIATE FALL OUT...

The initial impact of such incidents is on sustainability of the environment and society. Post the initial blow-out, roughly 2500 people have been evacuated and shifted to safe shelters. Two brave fire-fighters lost their lives while battling the fire. Reports indicate the condensate spewing from the well has been flowing into the wetlands and impacting the marine life in the eco-sensitive national park zone. In addition, the condensate spill has affected the livelihood of the people, who predominantly depend on fishing.

The second impact has been on investor confidence, very critical in a capital-intensive upstream business. With India importing almost 80 per cent of its oil requirement, there has been lot of thrust on increasing domestic production. Government has been trying to encourage investments and attract energy companies through progressive mechanisms such as the Open Acreage Licensing Policy and Discovered Small Field Policy, but such accidents hamper the investment ecosystem. Especially now when due to the on-going pandemic, companies are trying to tighten their purse.

Government has been working on simplifying the regulatory framework for companies to operate safely. This puts the onus on companies to manage their risks as it is not just about complying with the rules but to demonstrate ground safety and sustainability measures.

The current economy is challenged and the level of uncertainty has increased. There is a need for industries to go back to their drawing board and reassess their preparedness for such and many more other risks. Industries need to go the extra mile by not only mitigating risk to employees and assets, but by engaging the community, taking them into confidence and assuring them of safety. Unless industries are ready with continual risk mitigation practices, they will always be pulled back while trying to accelerate and grow. This is the right time for change; else companies are putting themselves at risk of closure. ■



NDRF men trying to control the fire

Authors work for DuPont Sustainable Solutions