



Activists highlight Safripol's toxic legacy with protest action

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Press release

Cape Town. – It is high time that Safripol, one of Africa's top plastic manufacturers, takes full responsibility for its toxic legacy of air pollution in local communities.

Today, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) and its supporters are protesting in Cape Town outside the building where KAP Industrial Holdings Limited is hosting its annual general meeting for its shareholders.

This protest aims to highlight the extreme air pollution that occurred at Safripol's plant in South Durban on 16 August this year. More than 1 700 people have fallen ill after inhaling noxious fumes emitted during the gas leak and chemical fire event. The event had devastating effects on the health and wellbeing of hundreds of people living and working in this industrial basin. During this particular incident, the plant released plumes of toxic chemicals that were smelt as far as 10km away.

Since then, SDCEA has been banned from the factory. Its members say they have now been forced to take drastic action: Activists are now going to protest. SDCEA and its supporters will confront shareholders of Safripol's holding company – KAP Industrial Holdings – today. KAP Industrial Holdings' shareholders are gathering in Cape Town to celebrate their profits of the past year, seemingly unaware of the human cost of their assets.

Community members breathed in their unfair share of this massive toxic emission, according to the Alliance. Safripol's pollution affected babies, pregnant mothers, and people already suffering from respiratory illnesses linked to the notoriously polluted South Durban air. Yet, after providing minimal support, Safripol withdrew its mobile clinic and failed to pay for medication for those affected.

This was the second incident of its kind happening at the company within a month. The plant's pollution also affected learners and teachers at the Umbilo Secondary School. This incident resulted in an early school dismissal where learners and teachers were sent home.

Approximately six cubic metres of 'Dowtherm' (a mixture of diphenyl oxide, biphenyl and diphenyl) was released into the air. This industrial chemical is known to cause respiratory health problems and skin irritation. Hundreds of residents within the area experienced burning eyes and mouths, nausea, bleeding noses, difficulty breathing, skin irritation and rashes, vomiting, headaches, and/or dizziness as a result.

Those who were directly affected were residents of areas in Wentworth and Merebank. Many residents, including children, needed immediate treatment after coming into contact with the gas. Most were hospitalised repeatedly due to prolonged symptoms linked to their exposure to air pollution. One person died due to medical complications.

“We call on shareholders to divest from the company due to its unethical practices,” SDCEA’s coordinator Desmond D’Sa said. “We need to hold the company responsible for failing to ensure our constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment.”

SDCEA demands the following:

- A meeting with key government officials, including Ms Barbara Creecy, Minister of Forestry and Fisheries and Environmental Affairs and the new eThekweni mayor Mr Mxolisi Kaunda, to discuss the situation.
- Safripol must be prosecuted for its role in this incident.
- Medication and health insurance must be provided to affected families who received treatment at the mobile clinic and local hospitals.
- An inclusive stakeholder meeting must be held to find long-term solutions for pollution in the area.
- An independent pulmonologist and other relevant specialists must be appointed to assess people with critical symptoms. In particular, babies and infants who have been exposed to pollution, need treatment.

For media enquiries:

Desmond D’Sa

Cell: 083 982 6939

Email: desmond@sdceango.com

Shanice Firmin

Cell: 081 799 0971

Email: shanicechantelf@gmail.com

Note to editors:

1. The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) is an environmental justice organisation based in South Durban. It is made up of 19 affiliate organisations and has been active since its formation in 1995. It is a non-governmental organisation existing on finances sourced from funders and sponsors to remain independent. It makes no profit and exists for the benefit of the people it represents. It is a vocal and vigilant group active in lobbying, reporting and researching industrial incidents and accidents in this area. Visit <https://sdcea.co.za> for more information.
2. **Photo opportunity:**
Protest action, in conjunction with Extinction Rebellion South Africa, will take place from 14:00 outside the Investec Building, 36 Hans Strijdom Avenue in Cape Town. Various people affected by the gas leak and chemical fire, as well as civil society activists supporting the campaign, will be available for interviews.