

11 DEAD AFTER INHALING TOXIC GAS IN LUDHIANA

On alert: A National Disaster Response Force team at the site of the gas leak in the Giaspura area of Ludhiana on Sunday. PTI

NDRF's air quality sensors detected high levels of hydrogen sulphide, but the source of the gas is yet to be identified; victims were from three families, all hailing from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

Eleven people — three of them children from a family — died and four were taken ill on inhaling toxic gas at Giaspura in Ludhiana on Sunday, officials said. Though the gas has been identified as hydrogen sulphide, its source is yet to be identified, they said.

Panic spread as people who came to a grocery store in the morning fainted. Soon, the area was cordoned off, and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and National Disaster Management Authority teams and State government officials were deployed. The residents were evacuated, and drones deployed to look for possible victims who could have been lying unconscious.

"In the air quality sensors used by the NDRF team, high levels of hydrogen sulphide gas have been detected and it is ascertained that this gas might have led to the tragic incident. The team of Ludhiana Municipal Corporation is also working to ensure that there is no further chemical contamination," Deputy Commissioner Surabhi Malik told the media.

Inquiry ordered

A magisterial inquiry has been ordered. The city police have registered an FIR against unknown persons, she said. "Those who died in the incident did

not show any symptoms of respiratory problems," Ms. Malik said. She appealed to people not to fall prey to rumour-mongering.

Health Minister Balbir Singh, who reached the spot, said the four persons admitted to the civil hospitals were out of danger.

The State government announced a compensation of ₹2 lakh each for the kin of the dead. An amount of ₹50,000 and free medical care will be given to those who became critically ill and are undergoing treatment, he added.

The casualties were members of three families, all of whom hailed from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, though they had settled in Punjab for over two decades.

They include five members of one family: Kalpana, 16, and her brothers Abhay, 13, and Aryan, 10, and their parents, Kavilash and Varsha, who ran a clinic in the area.

Saurav Goyal, 35, the owner of the grocery store where the victims collapsed, died along with his wife, Preeti, 31, and mother Kamlesh, 60. His elder brother Gaurav has been admitted to hospital. An accountant, Navneet Kumar, 39, and his wife, Neetu Devi, 37, also died. His brother Nitin is in hospital. One of the dead, a young man, is still unidentified.

FOCUS ON THE BORDERS

India and China must end the lingering unpredictability across the LAC

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's message to his visiting Chinese counterpart General Li Shangfu, that Beijing's violation of border agreements had "eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations", has once again served as a reminder of how the two neighbours remain far apart in their assessments of what ails their relationship, and how to fix it. Thursday's talks, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Defence Ministers Meeting in New Delhi, saw both sides reiterate their respective stands on the border issue but no meeting of minds. The Defence Minister underlined India's position that the development of ties is premised on peace on the borders. While India has continued to convey a sense of urgency to resolve the Line of Actual Control (LAC) crisis, the Chinese Defence Minister, on the other hand, called on India to "take a long-term view" and "place the border issue in an appropriate position in bilateral relations", a divergence from India's stand that the rest of relations is predicated on peace along the LAC. Rajnath Singh conveyed to Beijing that if normalcy is to be restored in ties, disengagement in the two remaining friction points will need to be followed by de-escalation. This includes the eventual de-induction of the estimated one lakh troops from both sides that have remained deployed in forward areas for close to three years — a situation

not seen along the India-China border in more than three decades.

The disengagement process has itself been long and tortuous. Over the past three years, buffer zones have been established in some of the five friction areas where the two sides disengaged. In two other areas, Demchok and Depsang, Beijing has dragged its feet, slowing down the initial momentum of the Corps Commander meetings. The 18th round, held days before the Chinese Defence Minister's arrival and after an unexplained four month-delay following the previous round, did not yield a joint statement, suggesting stark divergences remain on how to move forward. De-escalation, meanwhile, remains a far-off prospect. This new normal along the LAC, with large deployments in close proximity as well as an on-going race to build more forward infrastructure, appears here to stay, leaving the borders in what the Indian Army Chief has described as a "stable but unpredictable" state. Regardless of Beijing's wishes to downplay the seriousness of the border situation and relegate it to an "appropriate" position, managing the LAC should certainly remain the priority for both sides to prevent the recurrence of the clashes of 2020. India and China cannot restore normalcy in relations under the shadow of lingering unpredictability on the borders.

INDIA, ITS SDG PLEDGE GOAL, AND THE STRATEGY TO APPLY

The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, while addressing the first meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors under India's G20 Presidency, held on February 24-25, 2023, expressed concern that "progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) seems to be slowing down". Regardless of the global progress that has been made to date, the sheer population size of India means that realising Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at a global scale is intrinsically tied to the success of India. There is considerable confidence in India becoming the third largest economy in the world over the next decade. However, translating this growth into progress on social and human development must be equally valued. Seen from this perspective, the Prime Minister's concern deserves immediate attention.

India's progress is mixed

The SDGs framework sets targets for 231 unique indicators across 17

SDG goals related to economic development, social welfare and environmental sustainability, to be met by 2030. Roughly halfway to the deadline, where does India currently stand with regards to progress on these indicators? Are there lessons from India's recent mobilisation for COVID-19 (a comprehensive response that demonstrated India's ability to deliver at scale for its population) that could be adapted for the SDGs?

A recent study assesses India's progress on 33 welfare indicators, covering nine SDGs and providing a mixed picture of positive and concerning trends.

The good news is that India is 'On-Target' to meeting 14 of the 33 SDGs, including indicators for neonatal and under-five mortality, full vaccination, improved sanitation, and electricity access, all of which have substantially improved in the last five years. Unfortunately, the national 'On-Target'

designation does not apply equally across all districts. While neonatal and under-five mortality are currently both 'On-Target' for the country, 286 and 208 districts (out of 707 districts), respectively, are not. Similarly, significant progress on access to improved sanitation excludes 129 districts that are not on course to meet this SDG indicator.

Indicators such as eliminating adolescent pregnancy, reducing multidimensional poverty, and women having bank accounts have improved across a vast majority of the districts between the years 2016 and 2021.

Of concern, for 19 of the 33 SDG indicators, the current pace of improvement is not enough to meet SDG targets. Despite a national policy push for clean fuel for cooking, more than two-thirds (479) of districts remain 'Off-Target'. Similarly, some 415 and 278 districts are 'Off-Target' for improved water and handwashing facilities, respectively.

Of heightened concern are SDG indicators for women's well-being and gender inequality. No district in India has yet succeeded in eliminating the practice of girl child marriage before the legal age of 18 years. At the current pace, more than three-fourths (539) of districts will not be able to reduce the prevalence of girl child marriage to the SDG target of 0.5% by 2030. Unsurprisingly, other critical and related indicators such as teenage pregnancy (15-19 years) and partner violence (physical and sexual) that may be tracked back to child marriage are issues that India needs to escalate as priorities. Despite the overall expansion of mobile phone access in India (93% of households), only 56% women report owning a mobile phone, with 567 districts remaining 'Off-Target'. More detailed geographical exploration of the SDG indicators is available at: <https://bit.ly/3oTyjhz>.

Lessons from the COVID-19 approach

Designing and implementing a policy response to a pressing issue is best viewed as an "optimisation problem" relying on political will, responsive administration, adequate resources, and sound data. India adopted an "optimisation" approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and thus, it was given the

focus and resources necessary to succeed. There are lessons from this strategy that can inform and optimise India's approach to its SDG targets.

First, strong and sustained political leadership supported by a responsive administrative structure at all levels, from national to the district level, was critical to the success both of India's COVID-19 vaccination programme and its efficient rollout of a comprehensive relief package. This rare, nimble political-administrative synergy was willing to learn and undertake course corrections in real-time. Creating a similar mission-oriented ethos that is assessment-oriented and which provides adequate support for accomplishing India's district-level SDGs is now urgently needed.

Second, India's success with COVID-19 was largely possible both because of the existing digital infrastructure, as well as new, indigenous initiatives such as the Co-WIN data platform, and the Aarogya Setu application. Following these examples, India must put in place a coordinated, public data platform for population health management, by consolidating its many siloed platforms into an integrated digital resource for district administrators, as well as State and national policy makers.

Finally, a targeted SDG strategy delivered at scale must be executed with the same timeliness of India's COVID-19 relief package. As early as March 2020, the Government of India had put in place the ₹1.70 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, later augmented to nearly ₹6.29 lakh crore, which included the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (₹3.91 lakh crore until December 2022) covering 800 million people. Key to this relief programme was a mix of spending to provide direct in-kind and economic support, as well as measures aimed at revitalising the economy, small businesses, and agriculture. This was critical in blunting the adverse effects of COVID-19, especially for vulnerable and the socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It also measurably demonstrated the value of a proactive, government-supported programme specifically aimed at improving people's well-being.

THE PROTESTS AGAINST THE REFINERY PROJECT IN MAHARASHTRA

What is the Ratnagiri refinery and petrochemicals project? Is it going to harm the coastal Konkan region?

The story so far:

On April 25, the Maharashtra government started conducting soil testing at Rajapur tehsil's Barsu village in the coastal Ratnagiri district to know if the site was suitable for the proposed multi-billion dollar Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited project which is touted as the world's largest single location refinery complex. As of April 2022, India's oil refining capacity stood at 251.2 million metric tonnes per annum, making it the second-largest refiner in Asia and the fourth largest in the world.

What is the Barsu refinery project?

The project, which is expected to have a capacity of 60 million tonnes per annum, is a joint venture between Saudi Aramco, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), Indian Oil Corporation Limited, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited, and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited. The project was initially mooted in 2014 and is estimated to cost around rupees three lakh crore. Besides fuel, the project also proposes to develop various downstream petrochemicals to meet India's fast-growing petrochemical demand. Initially, the project was supposed to come up at Nanar, about 20 kilometres from Barsu. However, due to strong opposition from the locals, environmental activists and the Shiv Sena, the project was denotified in 2019.

How have the villagers reacted?

Hundreds of residents from Barsu-Solgaon and neighbouring villages are protesting the government's decision as they are concerned about the potential impact on the environment and the livelihoods of local communities. The project site is in a region that is ecologically sensitive, with several species of flora and fauna endemic to the area. The Konkan region has large mango orchards as well as jack fruit and cashew plantations. The villagers also expressed concern about the potential health hazards posed by the refinery and

petrochemical unit, which is expected to emit a large amount of pollutants. According to locals, Konkan already suffers from air pollution due to the presence of coal-fired power plants. Many farmers expressed concern that they would lose their source of livelihood if their land is acquired for the project.

Locals say that the project should be shifted to more arid zones in the State like Marathwada and Vidarbha.

What is the State gov.'s stand?

In November last year, the Shinde-Fadnavis government started issuing land acquisition notices to residents of six villages to acquire the initial 2,220 acres of land. It has been a strong supporter of the project and argued that it would help reduce India's dependence on crude oil imports and provide a boost to the economy, apart from generating employment for over one lakh people, both direct and indirect. While the BJP has been tight-lipped about the recent developments at Barsu, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said the project would not be implemented without the local people's consent. "We are a people's government...we will not proceed without the local people's consent," he said. According to Mr. Shinde, the Ratnagiri project is a green refinery and there will not be any pollution.

Why is the BJP pushing the project?

Firstly, the BJP leaders believe that the project would help them make inroads in the Shiv Sena and Shiv Sena (UBT) dominated Konkan region. Secondly, the party is touting the project as a significant step towards making India self-sufficient in the petrochemical sector, reducing the country's dependence on imports and further boosting the local economy. Further, Saudi Aramco has been expressing concern about the delay in the project due to the unavailability of land which has become a cause of concern for both the Centre and State governments.

WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

DESPERATE FOR JUSTICE

Wrestling needs to be rescued from its feudal culture of exploitation

India's leading wrestlers, especially women supported by their male counterparts, have again taken to the streets in Delhi. If the first protest was during the winter in January, the latest is happening in peak summer at Jantar Mantar. That both the biting cold and the searing heat did not diminish these athletes' determination to air their sexual-harassment grievances against the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) office-bearers, especially its president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, is a reflection of their trauma. It also reveals their sheer despondency as even the Oversight Committee led by Olympian Mary Kom set to clean up the system, has not yielded any results. That three inconclusive months have lapsed since the first public complaint is another pointer to the inhumane reaction that often trails sexual-harassment allegations. First there is silence from people in authority, then there are furious denials, and third, insinuations are allowed to seep in about the victim's morality. Brij Bhushan may have stepped aside from the day-to-day functioning of the WFI but this sports administrator, essentially a BJP MP from Uttar Pradesh, has enough clout to stymie efforts to prise him out from the federation.

Wrestling harks back to India's rural heartland, especially North India,

and is seen by sportspersons as an opportunity to escape the suffocating feudal atmosphere. The trust in a coach or official borders on blind devotion and this trait gets exploited. To not accept gender-violence as a sordid reality and to sweep it under the political-rivalry carpet does no good to Indian sport. This is not about the central government pitted against the opposition; it is about fairness in dealing with athletes. The Indian Olympic Association president, P.T. Usha, an icon for many, made it worse by stating that the athletes are tarnishing the country's image. Be it Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik or Bajrang Punia, who have led the protests, their quest for justice and desire for a complete overhaul of the WFI structure are genuine endeavours. The Supreme Court's directive that forced the Delhi Police to lodge a first information report against Brij Bhushan is a step in the right direction. More was expected from the larger sporting fraternity but with the exception of Olympic gold medallists Abhinav Bindra and Neeraj Chopra, the rest, especially the much-feted cricketers, have responded feebly. Kapil Dev and a few other players besides Sania Mirza voiced their concern through social media. But these remain the few volleys of resistance. India's medal-winning wrestlers deserve better.

A DECADAL PLAN

India needs to innovate a new policy path in order to meet the aspirations of its people in the decade ahead — there is no historical precedence for a democratic and economically open nation on how to deliver development to a billion-plus people in a manner that is healthy and sustainable. In successfully delivering a real-time response to the COVID-19 pandemic, India has proved that it is possible to deliver at scale in such an ambitious and comprehensive manner. To succeed in meeting its SDG targets, especially those related to population health and well-being, basic quality infrastructure, and gender equality, a similar concerted, pioneering, nation-wide effort would be the need of the hour.

Tread a new path, one that prioritises social justice

May 1 is widely known as Labour Day, a day when we celebrate the contribution of workers worldwide. It is a moment for pride, celebration and hope.

Three years after the COVID-19 crisis, followed by inflation, conflict, and food and fuel supply shocks, we badly need this. But the promises of renewal made during the pandemic, of 'building back better', have so far not been delivered for the great majority of workers worldwide.

Reverse the hard reality, mistrust

Globally, real wages have fallen, poverty is rising, and inequality seems more entrenched than ever. Enterprises have been hard hit. Many could not cope with the cumulative effects of recent unexpected events. Small and micro-enterprises were particularly affected, and many have ceased operations.

People feel that the sacrifices they made to get through COVID-19 have not been recognised, let alone rewarded. Their voices are not being heard clearly enough. This, combined with a perceived lack of opportunities, has created a disturbing level of mistrust.

It does not have to be like this. We are still the masters of our fate. But if we are to shape a new, more stable, and equitable world, we must choose a different path. One that prioritises social justice.

I believe this is not only do-able but also essential for a sustainable and stable future. So, how do we get there?

First and foremost, our policies and actions must be human-centred, to allow people to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, economic security and equal opportunity. This approach is not new, it was set out and agreed in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the International Labour Organization's international membership signed the Declaration of Philadelphia, in 1944.

Focusing on 'decent work'

This visionary document set out guiding principles for our economic and social systems, that they should not be turned exclusively to hitting specific growth rates or other statistical targets, but to address human needs and aspirations. This means focusing on inequality, poverty alleviation and core social protection. The most effective way to do this is by providing quality jobs so that people can support themselves and build their own futures — 'Decent Work for All', as Sustainable Development Goal 8 terms it.

It means realistically addressing the long-term structural transformations of our time; ensuring that new technology creates and supports employment; pro-actively facing the challenges of climate change and ensuring we offer the jobs, skills training and transition support necessary for workers and businesses to benefit from the new low-carbon era; treating demographic changes as a 'dividend' rather than a problem, with supporting action on skills, migration and social protection, to create more cohesive and resilient societies. We also need to reassess and refashion the architecture of our social and economic systems, so that they support this change of course towards social justice, rather than continuing to channel us into a policy 'doom loop' of inequality and instability. We must reinvigorate labour institutions and organisations so that social dialogue is effective and vigorous. We must review laws and regulations affecting the world of work, so that they are relevant and up-to-date and able to protect workers and support sustainable businesses.

Create a global platform

To make all this happen, we need to recommit to international cooperation and solidarity. We must enhance our efforts and create greater policy coherence, particularly within the multilateral system, as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, calls it.

This is why we need a Global Coalition for Social Justice. This coalition will create a platform to bring together a broad range of international bodies and stakeholders. It will position social justice as the keystone of the global recovery, so that it is prioritised in national, regional and global policies and actions. In sum, it will ensure that our future is human-centred.

We have the chance to reshape the world we live in — economically, socially and environmentally. Let us take this opportunity and move forward to build the equitable and resilient societies that can underpin lasting peace and social justice.

STRAY DOGS AND POOR WASTE MANAGEMENT

Is there a connection between an increasing urban stray dog population and how waste is generated, collected and managed? Has there also been a rise in urban solid waste? What role can equitable housing and sanitation policies play? How is India managing the stray dog problem?

The story so far:

In April, a 65-year-old woman in Srinagar was attacked by street dogs outside her home. A garbage collection point, a mound of food and poultry waste that becomes food for free-roaming dogs in the area, was situated in front of her house. Frequent reports of dogs attacking people to death have made the management of stray dogs an administrative and legal issue.

What do dog bites have to do with poor waste management?

The "carrying capacity" — the ability of a city to support a species — is determined by the availability of food and shelter. Free-ranging dogs, in the absence of these facilities, are scavengers that forage around for food, eventually gravitating towards exposed garbage dumping sites. Dogs thus congregate around urban dumps, such as landfills, due to feeding

opportunities.

A population boom in Indian cities has contributed to a staggering rise in solid waste. Indian cities generate more than 1,50,000 metric tonnes of urban solid waste every day. According to a United Nations Environment Program 2021 report, an estimated 931 million tonnes of food available to consumers ended up in households, restaurants, vendors and other food service retailers' bins in 2019. Indian homes on average generated 50 kg of food waste per person, the report said. This waste often serves as a source of food for hunger-stricken, free-roaming dogs that move towards densely-populated areas in cities, such as urban slums which are usually located next to garbage dumping sites and landfills.

Urban dogs are believed to have a distinct set of traits as compared to rural dogs, as they have "learnt to develop survival techniques in fast-paced, often hostile motorised urban environments", a 2014 study argues. It also says "...dogs do not usually pose a threat to human well-being, and proper management of refuse and a tolerant, if not friendly attitude towards dogs can ensure their peaceful co-existence with us."

What role does urbanisation play?

Cities have witnessed a sharp increase in the stray dog population, which as per the official 2019 livestock census stood at 1.5 crore. However, independent estimates peg the number to be around 6.2 crore. The number of dog bites has simultaneously doubled between 2012 and 2020. India also shoulders the highest rabies burden in the world, accounting for a third of global deaths caused due to the disease. In 2015, a study conducted in 10 Indian metro cities found a strong link between human population, the amount of municipal and food waste generated, and the number of stray dogs in the cities. It argued, "in effect, the present mode of urbanisation and paradigm of development innately promotes urban sprawls, slums, disparity... With the development of cities, managing solid waste has become a daunting challenge," and the "unconfined and unmanaged leftovers" end up aiding the proliferation of stray

dogs.

While there is no evidence to show that a rising population and municipal waste directly led to an increase in dog bites, experts agree there may be a correlation between urbanisation and solid waste production, made visible due to the mismanagement of waste disposal. Trepid animal birth control programmes and insufficient rescue centres, in conjunction with poor waste management, result in a proliferation of street animals in India.

Additionally, most landfills and dumping sites are located on the peripheries of cities, next to slums and settlement colonies. Thus, the disproportionate burden of dog bites may also fall on people in urban slums. In 2021, 300 people living in Pune's Shivneri Nagar slum complained of stray dog bites in the area, as per reports. In 2020, 17 people, including young children, who lived in Ramabai Nagar, a slum spread over an area of 120 acres in Ghatkopar East, were bitten by stray dogs.

A study published in 2016 found that the prevalence of dog bites was higher in urban slums — usually located in close proximity to dumping sites — than rural slums. The proximity of residential areas to dumping sites and the rise in dog attacks speak to "core issues of unplanned and unregulated urban development, the lack of serviced affordable urban housing for all, lack of safe livelihood options and improper solid waste management", researchers at the World Resource Institute wrote in a blog.

How has India managed the problem?

India's response to the "stray dog menace" has relied upon the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme, through which municipal bodies trap, sterilise and release dogs to slow down the dog population. The second anchor was rabies control measures, including vaccination drives. But implementation suffers from low awareness around the health implications of dog bites, irregular supply of vaccines, delay in seeking treatments, and a lack of national policy, experts say.

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