

Area has turned into hazmat zone, but govt doesn't care, say Dombivli MIDC residents

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Devastation: A woman waits outside a hospital for news of her relative; an NDRF team at the blast site; a house completely damaged by force of the blast—Photos: AP and Sandeep Rasal

Dombivli, where a chemical factory blast claimed 2 lives, is certified as 'critically polluted' by CPCB. Locals blame industrialist-politician nexus for such units

It was a routine morning for Madhukar Bele when he set out from home to buy vegetables, till the blast at the chemical factory in the Dombivli MIDC around 11.30 am shook his neighbourhood on Thursday. Bele, 67, remembers the instant panic as people ran helter-skelter in fear and confusion.

"We hear stories of bomb blasts and terrorism these days, so everyone thought a bomb had exploded nearby. People ran for their life in the opposite direction. We felt the vibration, and some window panes shattered. When I reached home, I saw people standing outside the building, fearing the blast shock would bring it down," he said. "The first hour was the worst, as the rumour of a bomb blast spread. The panic and the people running only added to the chaos. As windows were shattered all over the area, not many of us knew exactly where the explosion had occurred for half an hour," said local resident Mugdha Desai.

As it became clear that the blast had occurred in a chemical factory thanks to the police vans which started making rounds with announcements on speakers, panic gave way to anger against industries in the area.

Dombivli has been listed since 2009 as a critically polluted city by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and the Ministry of Environment and Forests, mainly because of the pollution by chemical factories. A case against polluting industries for causing damage to the Ulhas river is being fought in the Supreme Court NGO Vanashakti. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) ruled in Vanashakti's favour and imposed hefty fines on polluting units, civic bodies and the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB). "We inhale that smell of chemicals all the while. Many a time, chemicals are released in the open drain and it becomes worse. There were incidents of fire in the past, but today's blast was an eye-opener," Sagar Koshti, a resident of Milap Nagar, MIDC, said.

Some years ago, the MIDC area experienced green rains, which were attributed to the presence of chemicals in the area. "Such is the level of pollution that many residents have stopped going for morning walks as the whole area is full of chemicals. Some have even collapsed during their walks," Sudesh Berde, an MIDC resident for past 25 years, said.

He added that despite numerous complaints to authorities and elected representatives, only temporary measures are taken. "It seems good for a day or two and then everything goes back to how it was," Mr Berde said.

MPCB officials could not be contacted despite repeated attempts. "Firstly, allowing chemical factories to be situated so close to a residential zone is ridiculous. This is an absolute threat to human existence. This is because of the nexus between officials and factory owners.," Stalin D. of Vanashakti said.

Some years ago, the area had experienced green rains due to the high chemicals level

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