

Seveso Update

Aftermath of deadly Italian chemical release

Fifth Estate Collective

1977

A year-ago this month (July 10, 1976 to be exact), an explosion at the Icmesa chemical plant in Seveso, Italy garnered worldwide attention as the release of 4.4 pounds of deadly tetrachlorodibenzodioxin, or TCDD, contaminated the town and forced the mass evacuation of its inhabitants. [See these related *Fifth Estate* articles.]

A component of the defoliants used by the U.S. forces in Vietnam, dioxin was known to have caused the citizens of Seveso to suffer severe headaches, profuse sweating, kidney and liver pains, violent vomiting, acute diarrhea and a grotesque skin infection called Chloracne, a condition which leaves the skin pitted and covered with red patches.

At the time of the evacuation there was some concern expressed as to the genetic effects of dioxin. A study conducted by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration on the effect of TCDD on farm animals had suggested that the chemical was one thousand times more hazardous to fetuses than teratogen, the deforming agent in thalidomide. It now appears as though that concern was totally justified.

Alarmed at the growing rate of deformity since the explosion, about ten Seveso women a week of the 650 currently pregnant are requesting abortions. Thus far, thirty-six have had legal abortions. The sterilization and abortion information center, however, has calculated that at least eighty more have had illegal abortions to avoid the publicity.

Genetic damage aside, local doctors have said they have treated over 1,000 people from the Seveso area for various illnesses. Children particularly have been affected by skin rashes and more than 400 have needed treatment.

As dire as all this sounds, the worst could quite easily be yet to come. The damage to men, women and children, born and unborn, is incalculable and may well not be fully recognized for another generation.

More than \$125 million has already been spent to clean up the polluted Seveso area. Amongst the protective measures, the topsoil is being removed and burned in special high-temperature incinerators.

According to United Press International (UPI), six Swiss and Italian factory directors are scheduled to stand trial on charges of precipitating a disaster, criminal damage and injury.

In the meantime, the people of Seveso have been uprooted for over a year now and their lives (and perhaps the lives of their descendants) have been permanently and irrevocably damaged.

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