

"DD6"

# Pupils fall ill after 'toxic emissions'

KUBEN CHETTY  
AND LEE RONDGANGER

MORE than a hundred children at the Settlers' Primary School in Merebank suffered severe nausea, vomiting and headaches this week.

The school's environment officer Lawrence Vartharajalu claimed the symptoms were caused by sulphur dioxide emissions in the South Durban basin. He confirmed that two Sapref officials had visited the school, but their findings were inconclusive.

This took place within two months of the release of an international report by experts from Michigan University in the US which stated that more than 80% of the children at Settlers', in the area near the Engen and Sapref refineries, suffered from asthma.

The report said Settlers' students had one of the highest rates of asthma in the world.

Vartharajalu said that on Monday classes had to stop. "We first began to get a strong sulphur smell. Children's eyes began to water. There was an itchiness in their throats. Some pupils started vomiting."

Vartharajalu said work had to stop as soon as pupils started complaining that they could not breathe. "We sent out a list to all classes to ascertain how many people had been affected by the emissions."

## Asthma

According to the American study, more than 248 pupils and teachers who took part in the study were reported to be suffering from severe or mild asthma symptoms.

Of these, about 17% were believed to be suffering from moderate to severe asthma, 14% had mild but persistent symptoms and 14% had mild but intermittent symptoms.

An Engen spokesman said the refinery was not responsible for Monday's SO<sub>2</sub> pollution. The refinery, he said, had more than halved its daily SO<sub>2</sub> emissions since introducing methane-rich gas burners last year, instead of heavy fuel-oil fired furnaces.

He said complainants might have fingered Engen as the culprit for Monday's incident because of an unusual "flare-up" late that afternoon which resulted in the safety shut-down of refinery equipment.

Robin Bissett, air quality chemist for the eThekweni municipality, said none of the pollutants measured earlier in the week had exceeded World Health Organisation guidelines.

SUNDAY TRIBUNE  
5 May 2002

11/10/11  
Daily News



**CHOKING:** Black smoke billows from the Engen oil refinery in Wentworth yesterday. Daily News reader Romany Roberts, who supplied this picture, said she suffered from asthma, and fires like yesterday's left her sick for days. There is no asthma clinic in Wentworth, she pointed out.

## Workers and pupils evacuated after fire at refinery

**LEE RONDGANGER**

THE Engen oil refinery near Wentworth in Durban south had to be evacuated after a fire ripped through the crude oil distillation unit.

Engen spokesman Herb Payne said the fire started at about 11am yesterday and was brought under control within half an hour.

However, the fire caused a temporary halt of production at the 125 000 barrels-a-day refinery. The refinery supplies 25 percent of South Africa's fuel.

Pupils at Fairvale Secondary School, directly oppo-

site the refinery's main entrance, were sent home early as a precaution.

A thick column of black smoke billowed from the north side of the refinery.

A team from eThekweni Metro's Chemical Firefighting Unit were sent to the plant to help the refinery's in-house firefighting team.

Metro police cordoned off sections of Tara Road to vehicles while anxious workers waited outside the refinery gate.

Wentworth residents said they had heard three sharp sirens, each five seconds long, alerting them that a fire had

broken out in the refinery.

They waited anxiously yesterday afternoon for two sharp sirens to inform them that the fire had been contained.

"When I saw the smoke and heard the sirens, I thought: 'Oh no, not again,'" said resident Eddie Ogle.

"Fortunately it was not a big one this time and it looks like everything will be okay.

"Many people in the community are worried because there is a shut-down coming up which means (temporary) jobs.

"Hopefully this fire won't affect the shut-down," he said.

Engen's scheduled mainte-

nance shut-down of the plant is expected to take place over the next six weeks.

In 2008 the refinery was forced to shut down for more than two months after a fire broke out in a unit that feeds crude oil into the processing plant.

The repairs cost the company R50 million.

Payne said yesterday's fire was minor in comparison because production of crude oil had been started up by late afternoon.

The two sirens, informing the community and Engen workers that the fire had been coused, went off at 3pm.



# Pupils taken to hospital after blaze at refinery

Tony Gamble

MORE than 100 primary school children were taken to hospital yesterday - some struggling for breath, others with itchy skin and eyes - after being splattered by airborne droplets of crude oil and a cloud of smoke and soot from another fire at the Engen fuel refinery in South Durban.

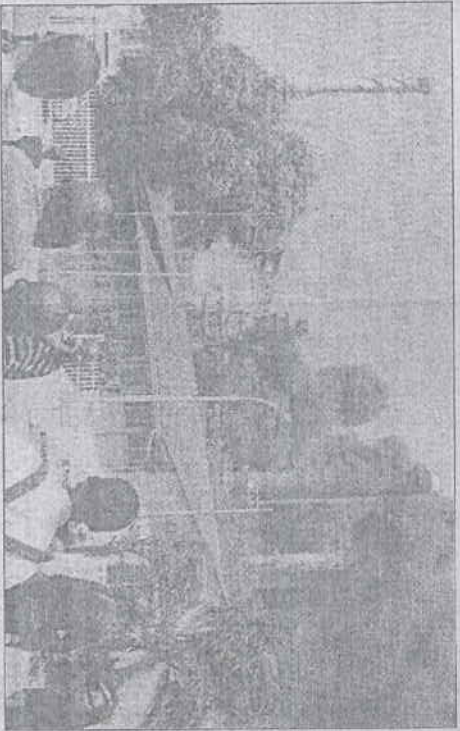
Westworth Hospital manager Surrya Kader said 101 children from Settlers Primary School in Merebank and 10 adults had been brought in with signs or symptoms of dizziness, itchiness, headaches and sore eyes.

About 20 of the children were treated with allergy medication, headache pills or calamine lotion, while two were nebulised because of breathing problems.

None were admitted, however, and most did not require medical treatment.

Meanwhile, the refinery remained closed late yesterday after flames erupted from a crude oil distillation unit, which caught fire just before 11am.

Refinery manager Kamal Bab-



Ortodockers gather at the main entrance to the Engen refinery in Durban yesterday as smoke billows from a fire.

PICTURE: SOUTH DURBAN COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ALLIANCE

rin, Ahmad said it had taken 20 minutes for Engen firemen to bring the fire under control. No staff had been injured.

There have been several fires at the refinery in the past few years, including a petrol tank which burned for 58 hours after being struck by lightning in November 2007. The latest fire has also sparked

new calls from local community groups for a government commission of inquiry into safety issues and maintenance at the refinery.

Anna-Lydia Pillay, an 11-year-old pupil at the school in Lakhimpur Road, said that many pupils were outside during break when they saw a cloud of dark smoke. Along with several other pupils

seen by The Mercury at Westworth Hospital, Anna-Lydia's white school clothes were stained with blotches of an oily substance carried downwind to the school, less than a kilometre from the refinery fence.

"Some of the kids were getting oxygen from paramedics and others were feeling sick. Our noses were burning and our eyes were watering. I'm still feeling a bit shaken up and my skin was also very itchy from the black drops which came in the air," Anna-Lydia said.

Her mother, Charmain Andreoli, said it was "high time" that something was done to improve safety and reduce environmental pollution from the refinery.

Desmond D'sa, of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, said the latest fire was an indictment against both Engen and government health and safety officials.

Ahmad said it was too early to say what had caused the fire. "We regret any inconvenience or discomfort caused," refinery spokesman Herb Payne said.

10/10/2011  
Mercury



Residents of South Durban who are fed-up of being at the receiving end of Engen Oil Refinery's toxic fumes are threatening legal action against the multi-billion rand company for continuously impacting negatively on their health and environment.

At a recent mass meeting at Settler's Primary School last week, residents vented their frustration over the latest fire at the refinery which affected more than 300 people. Present at the meeting were two lawyers who listened to the concerns of residents and advised them accordingly.

Residents together with local environmental organisation, South Durban Community Environment Alliance (SDCEA) will hold a protest outside the refinery on Saturday, October 22, from 8am and also plan on boycotting all Engen service stations.

18/10/11  
Rising Sun

Desmond Dasa, chairman from SDCEA, said, "Engen has displayed arrogance and insensitivity by wanting us to pay for the value of R30 to people to have their clothes and cars washed at designated hand-dromats and car wash facilities. This just goes to show how cheap our lives are to this company. The community is now calling on the MEC for Agriculture, Environmental Affairs and Rural Development, Lydia Johnson and the eThekweni Municipality to hold the refinery accountable for its actions by commissioning an inquiry into the recent fire which broke out at the crude oil unit."

About 300 people including pupils from Settler's Primary School became ill with respiratory problems and were taken to nearby hospitals after toxic fumes from the crude oil unit permeated the air during the fire.

Dasa said, "We urge the refinery management to give the community online information about the pollution they are releasing in the air. We want to know why this continues to occur and what they are doing to eliminate the toxic fumes from our air and what toxic fumes have been released into the environment? There have been numerous incidents in south Durban over the years at the petro-chemical and chemical industries and none of the companies have been held accountable for their actions. While this continues to occur our families members are dying."

Mrs Malik Moodley, a Shillong Road, resident who has been living in Merebank for over 50

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## Residents call for refinery's closure

Continued from page 1

years, said. "My neighbour had to be hospitalised as a result of the fumes emitted from the refinery. At first, we thought we were looking at a cloud until other people on the road came out of their houses and told us it was a ball of fire. My neighbour went home to take her clothes off the line and suddenly became severely ill. She began shaking uncontrollably. A representative from Engen who didn't even have a cellphone with him used my landline to call a local doctor. He then drove us to a doctor's surgery. My neighbour was nebulised twice and given medication as well as an injection but that didn't help her. Her daughter informed me that her mother's condition had deteriorated and she had to be hospitalised. On the day of the fire, residents were given vouchers valued at R30 to get their clothes and cars cleaned. Our lives are worth more than R30. We are not cheap and although oil settled on our clothes and cars that is not what is important our health and safety and right to a clean safe environment is more important. The refinery needs to be closed down."

Tania Landsberg, group communications manager at Engen's Corporate Affairs Division, said, "The cause of the fire is still under investigation.

The fire was brought under control within 30 minutes. Children from Settler's Primary School were transported to Wentworth hospital where they were assessed. Four were nebulised, but none were hospitalised and all medical bills were paid for. A thorough investi-

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gation into the cause of the fire is currently underway and once the cause has been determined, measures will be put in place to prevent future incidents of this nature."

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*Rising Sun*