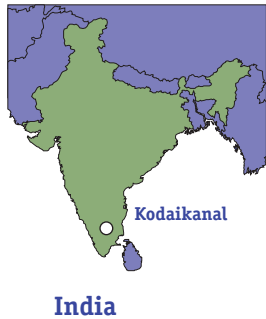




Cleaning up Mercury Waste in India

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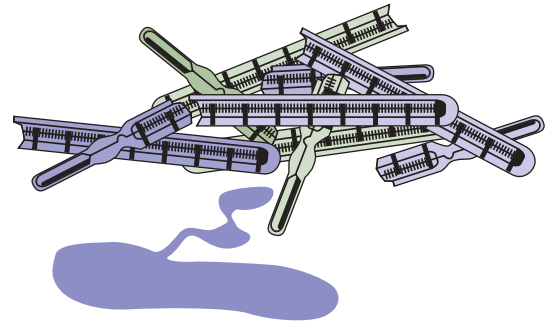
E-LAW advocates in southern India have helped defuse an environmental time bomb.

Hindustan Lever Ltd., a subsidiary of the Anglo-Dutch multinational Unilever, operated a mercury thermometer factory in Kodaikanal, in the state of Tamil Nadu. The plant moved to India in 1983 after it was shut down in Watertown, New York. Tons of mercury waste from broken thermometers at the India site found its way to a dirt lot in a neighborhood near the factory. Local environmental authorities ordered the company to collect and dispose of the waste.

E-LAW advocates Nityanand Jayaraman, T. Mohan, and S. Devika called on E-LAW U.S. to evaluate the company's proposed cleanup plan. E-LAW U.S. Staff Scientist Mark Chernaik found that the plan contained numerous flaws and lacked important environmental safeguards.

The plan did not adequately control public access to the contaminated area and would have allowed persons cleaning up the waste to work without respirators. In addition, the plan would have covered the contaminated area with a tarpaulin sheet which would trap hazardous mercury vapors that would be undetectable by the plan's instruments.

When liquid mercury is spilled, it forms droplets that can accumulate in the tiniest of spaces and then emit vapors into the air. Health problems caused by mercury depend on how much has entered your body. Regardless of quantity, all mercury spills should be treated seriously.



In March 2003, the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board ordered the company to ship the mercury-laden waste back to the United States for proper disposal. Under close supervision, the waste was packed into containers and brought to a port in Tamil Nadu for loading onto a ship bound for the U.S. The ship, carrying some 300 tons of mercury-contaminated waste from Kodaikanal, departed May 2003 for Bethlehem Apparatus, a mercury recycling plant in Pennsylvania.

Our partners in India thanked E-LAW U.S. for "the bedrock of scientific support, critiquing the preliminary clean up protocol, and providing the requisite information at ridiculously short notice."

For more information about this E-LAW Impact, contact the U.S. office of the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide at elawus@elaw.org.