

## Deadly risks of lead-free petrol

New petrochemical plants intended to improve city environments by producing "lead-free" petrol have created another, more deadly, environmental hazard. Accidents at the plants could lead to lethal clouds of hydrofluoric acid (HF), putting "tens of thousands at peril", according to the Washington-based Environmental Policy Institute.

The new process for making unleaded petrol involves using HF to achieve high octane ratings without adding lead. But HF is one of the most corrosive chemicals in existence, capable of eating away at glass and dissolving most metals. Dr Jag Cook, from Britain's National Chemical Emergency Group—which is responsible for mopping up any major toxic spills in the UK—said: "HF is about the only chemical that frightens me."

Demand for unleaded petrol is expected to grow dramatically. A major new HF plant is being built by Shell at Stanlow, Cheshire, and will start operation in about six months time. It will be about the sixth such plant in Britain. Another is run by Mobil at Coryton, Essex. The location of the others is, according to the Health and Safety Executive, officially secret.

Recent trials and several accidents in the last year in the US have shown that industrial HF sites are a major threat to public safety. An HF leak on 30 October 1987 at the Marathon refinery in Texas City left 700 people in need of urgent medical treatment. It was only luck that prevented the accident from being the major industrial catastrophe of the year.

Dr Fred Millar of the Environmental Policy Institute said: "The release was from the vapour space of a storage tank. If the same release had been of HF liquid, thousands would likely have died in the ensuing gas cloud. It would have been our Bhopal."

Nonetheless no new regulations were introduced—and a few months later another HF explosion occurred at Mobil's refinery in Torrance, California. This led to a raging 41-hour fire and millions of pounds' worth of damage. In March this year, there was a third HF leak, this time in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The disaster at the Sun Company refinery there produced a three-mile-long cloud which engulfed the town. Only a prompt evacuation limited the casualties to 36 people (none fatal).

A US government test at a desert site in 1986 showed that even a relatively small liquid HF accident would release a dense, ground-hugging gas

cloud that would remain lethal for five miles.

A report written after the Torrance accident suggested that "the consequences may be so great as to warrant regulations to direct industry to phase out its use or substitute processes with less environmental hazards." US research has shown that there are alternative processes.

Although Friends of the Earth have only recently taken up the issue, it was, said FoE specialist Andrew Lees, "high time this stuff was brought to public attention".

*Nigel Townson & Duncan Campbell*

## THIS ENGLAND

£5 Book Tokens for entries printed. (Postcards please.)

● *Skateboard* magazine has been attacked by the Advertising Standards Authority for carrying a "contemptible and offensive" advert promoting its subscriptions.

Ten members of the public objected to the advert headlined: "SUBSCRIBE to Skateboard! or we shoot this dog" and showed a "cowering" puppy with a cocked revolver up against its head.—*Magazine Week* (A de Salles)

● Peter Bottomley, Minister for Roads and Traffic, today launched a new minibus which has been designed and built with the needs of passengers as a top priority.—Department of Transport press release (Leonora Casement)

● Police arrested two people less than a mile from the home of Northern Ireland Secretary Tom King after they failed to say hello to his 25-year-old daughter. The minister's daughter was out horse-riding with a friend the morning her parents left their farmhouse home in the village of Ford, Wiltshire, when she saw the man and woman sitting on a wall, a court heard yesterday. Finbar Cullen, 27, and 22-year-old Martina Shanahan did not speak to her as she rode by and she reported the matter to police on security duty at the farmhouse.—*Evening Standard* (Pat Butler)

● Mr David Calcutt, QC, Master of Magdalene, said that without women his college would have been something of an anachronism and standards might have suffered. The arrival of the women had necessitated considerable redecoration throughout the college.

Powder-blue tiles have replaced peeling plasterwork and bedroom doors have been fitted with spy-holes to improve safety.—*The Times* (Leonard Cox)

# KAMPUCHEA GIVE HOPE TO A FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

- People's needs are **STILL** enormous — only one in a hundred Kampucheans has access to clean drinking water; one child in five dies before the age of 5.
- Pol Pot's regime killed over a million Kampuchean people and left the country devastated. Yet his flag **STILL** flies at the UN!
- Western Governments **STILL** refuse vital development aid to Kampuchea.



- Oxfam is doing everything it can to help: repairing water systems, drilling wells and helping people grow enough food.

## TWO WAYS YOU CAN HELP

1. Please make a donation — help Oxfam's work in Kampuchea.
2. Join the **FAST** — 4/5/6 NOVEMBER — pick up a sponsorship form at your local Oxfam shop or fill in the form below.

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