

Rouen Gas Leak

On Monday 21 January a cloud of harmless but strong-smelling gas leaked out of a chemicals factory in Rouen, northwest France, spreading towards Paris in one direction and over the English Channel towards London in the other.

The gas that escaped from the factory, owned by chemical firm Lubrizol, was methyl mercaptan, commonly added to odourless natural gas to make it detectable.

Mercaptan is not a health hazard unless it is inhaled in strong concentrations. Shortly after people started to smell the leaked gas, which is described as having the odour of rotten eggs, the authorities were quick to communicate the risk to the public.

The spread of the gas prompted calls to emergency services in France on Tuesday morning, which led to the Paris Police department issuing a statement declaring that the gas posed no health risks but warning that the gas smelled like a mixture of 'sweat, garlic and rotten eggs.'

French Ecology Minister Dephine Batho cut short a trip to Berlin to visit the Rouen factory and supervise the emergency operations to stop the leak. Ms Batho reassured the public that the leak was not hazardous and stated that operations could take several days: 'I prefer that we take our time rather than take risks.'

The gas leak also prompted the postponement of the Coupe de France football match between Rouen and Olympique Marseille, with officials preferring not to take any risks with the safety of spectators.

'We did not want to find ourselves with 10,000 fans two kilometres from the factory and with no means of confining them or evacuating them if necessary,' said local government official Florence Gouache.

On Tuesday morning people in southern England were greeted by the foul-smelling gas that had made its way over the Channel during the night. The National Grid, which deals with reports of gas leaks, was inundated with more than 100,000 calls by 2pm on Tuesday, more than ten times the average number of calls received on a normal day.

Once it had been confirmed that it was the Rouen gas cloud that had sparked fears of gas leaks in southern England, the authorities took to communication channels to calm the public.

The Health Protection Agency offered reassurance to members of the public, insisting that the gas had dissipated on its journey across the Channel and so would not pose any threat. 'It is an unpleasant odour which may cause some people to feel slightly nauseous but it is not toxic and will dispel naturally,' said the Health Protection Agency in a statement.

The Metropolitan Police took to Twitter to calm public anxiety, tweeting: 'We are aware of reports of a strong, noxious, gas-like smell in some South East London boroughs. No risks to public.'

A spokesman for West Sussex Fire and Rescue urged members of the public to avoid reporting the smell unless there were other reasons to suspect a gas leak, such as road works.

In Kent, the Fire and Rescue Service advised people in the south of the county to keep doors and windows closed, in an attempt to prevent the gas from entering their homes.

The Rouen episode raises questions about the susceptibility of Britain to gas leaks from France, and the channels of communication between the two nations that are necessary to enable the British authorities to adequately deal with these risks.

The fact that such vast numbers of people in Britain reported gas leaks on Tuesday morning suggests that the awareness and communication of the risk between France and Britain was lacking.

Whilst the British authorities were quick to communicate with the public once they were aware of the cause of the foul smell, one wonders whether they would have been able to react quickly enough had the cloud of gas posed risks to the health of the public.

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