

INDIA

Monsoon rains slow efforts to

Blaze at leaking well threatens people, wildlife and environment in ecologically sensitive area

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London and New Delhi

OIL India Limited (OIL) is still battling the fire that broke out at its producing Baghjan oilfield in India's Tinsukia district following a blowout in late May.

Two company firefighters have lost their lives and another four workers have been injured as the operator tries to bring the blaze under control and cap the ill-fated Baghjan-5 well in the north-eastern state of Assam.

Remedial work over the past fortnight has been hampered by particularly heavy rains during this year's annual monsoon season with operations having to be suspended earlier this week after floodwaters, including from the overflowing Dangori River, inundated the area.

OIL has already had to enlist the help of the Indian Army to construct and maintain a floating bridge near the blazing well after flooding washed away a key access route.

Not only has the fire yet to be extinguished, the accident has raised questions over oil and gas operations near to households and in the vicinity of ecologically sensitive areas in Assam, the birthplace of India's oil industry.

Two OIL employees have been suspended for alleged negligence of duty relating to blowout, which reportedly occurred during workover operations on the Baghjan-5 well.

"The company is carrying out an internal inquiry and we have placed two officials responsible for the well under suspension. Once the probe is over, we will take a final decision on their role," said OIL.

Experts from Singapore-based Alert Disaster Control have been on location since early June and are trying to stop the leaking gas and cap the well, although their efforts have been severely hampered by the weather.

Contractor Environmental Resources Management (ERM) was on 28 June monitoring air quality and noise levels as well as collecting water and soil samples on the Baghjan side of the waterlogged site.

Meanwhile, an ecological survey is being carried out in the Maguri grassland area and a consultation has been undertaken between ERM and a local ecology expert.

OIL noted that these studies

will be continued until a week after the Baghjan-5 well has been successfully capped.

In tandem, the Energy & Resources Institute (TERI), a Delhi-based not-for-profit policy research organisation, is carrying out several studies including one on the bioremediation of sludge.

However, this particular study has been put on hold until the water levels recede in the earmarked locations.

"Debris removal activity has been resumed, which is one of the most critical components of (the) capping operation of the blowout well," OIL said on 29 June.

However, flooding has severely damaged most of the connecting roads to the well site, resulting in delays in bringing in equipment and materials, including welding and cutting sets, generators and a bulldozer.

Repair work to the road infrastructure is being carried out on a "war footing" jointly by OIL and the Assam Public Works Department, the operator said.

Consignments of other kit have also been delayed in transit due to the heavy rain and heavy traffic jam en route, noted OIL.

The heavy rainfall and flooding is affecting the relief camps that have become the temporary homes for some 2500 locals affected by the incident.

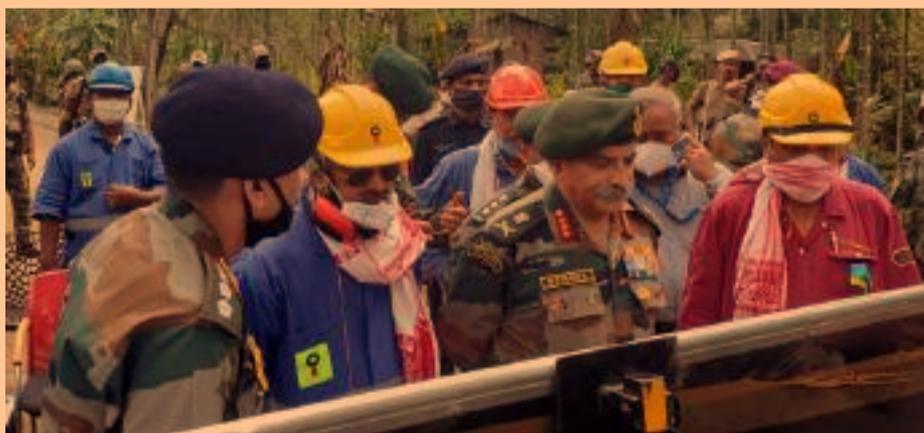
Also, surveys for the assessment of damage for compensation by the committee constituted by the Tinsukia District Administration have been hindered by the monsoon weather.

More than 620 families affected by the blowout and fire had been surveyed as of 28 June.

Assam's Pollution Control Board last week ordered OIL to close all production and drilling operations at its Baghjan oilfield and "take all necessary measures" to extinguish the fire, which has been burning since 9 June following the late May blowout.

Issuing the closure notice, the board claimed that the operator had "nonchalantly violated the provisions of law in force causing pollution to the environment".

An OIL official told the Times of India: "We respect the Pollution Control Board but we are seeking legal recourse against the closure notice. OIL is not a fly-by-night operator. Its operations are very complex and we simply cannot close the valve and go away."



India's National Green Tribunal (NGT) has formed an eight-member committee of experts to investigate the blowout and fire, and the impact it has had on people, wildlife and the environment.

In an order passed via videoconference on 24 June, NGT instructed the operator to deposit 250 million rupees (\$3.31 million) with the Tinsukia District Administration as interim compensation for the damage.

The Baghjan-5 oilfield is located near the Maguri Motapung Wetland and the Dibru Saikhowa National Park, which are home to several endangered species, including hoolock gibbons, Gangetic dolphins and some 400 species of birds.

The committee will assess the compensation for those affected

by the incident and suggest preventive and remedial measures.

The tribunal has directed the committee to submit its preliminary report "as expeditiously as possible" and the NGT will next take up the matter on 29 July.

Locals have been protesting against OIL's latest incident and the demonstrations and blockades at the company's operations have led to production losses totalling 8832 tonnes (around 65,000 barrels) of oil and 11.38 million cubic metres of gas from 27 May to 28 June. OIL has been operating at the Baghjan oilfield for 19 years and has some 20 producing wells



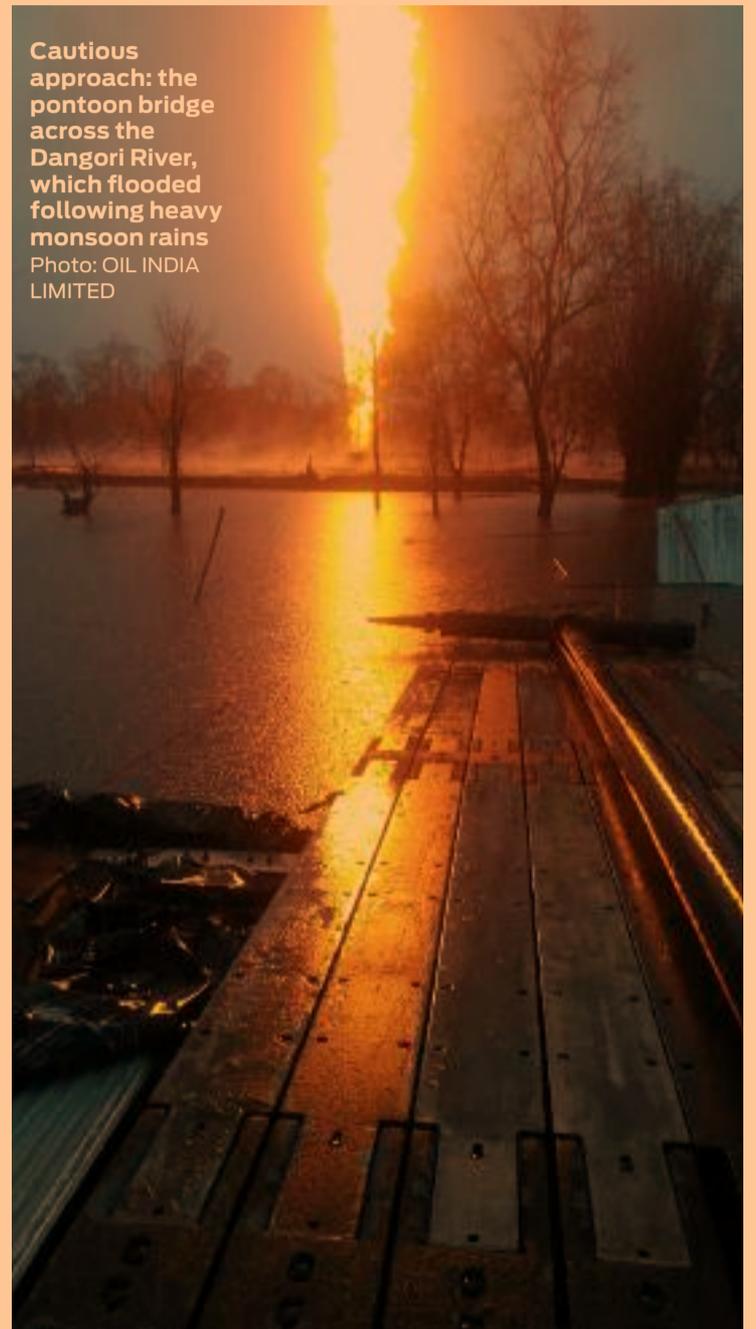
We haven't learnt the most crucial lesson from past disasters.

Manju Menon,
senior fellow at the
Delhi-based Centre
for Policy Research

contain Oil India fire in Assam



Rescue operation: National Disaster Response Force personnel at the site of the fire at Baghjan
Photo: AP/SCANPIX



Cautious approach: the pontoon bridge across the Dangori River, which flooded following heavy monsoon rains
Photo: OIL INDIA LIMITED



Far left: Lt General Rana Pratap Kalita, General Officer Commanding of the 3 Corps with other senior officials from 3 Corps, Indian Army visit the site of the Baghjan blowout

Centre: mosquito repellent is distributed at a relief camp near the site of the fire

Left: the site of the well fire at Baghjan

Photos: OIL INDIA LTD/ AP/AFP/SCANPIX

Blowout puts spotlight on new environmental rules

NISHANT UGAL and AMANDA BATTERSBY

NEW regulations that would ease the environmental impact assessment process for oil and gas exploration in India could lead to more incidents like the Baghjan oilfield blowout and fire, a prominent Indian environmental policy expert has warned.

Incidents such as the Oil India Limited (OIL) blaze raise alarms about the country's commitment to environmental safety, said Manju Menon, senior fellow at the Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research.

Public hearings are mandatory for projects such as OIL's Assam operations under India's Environment Impact Assessment Notification, the law that governs the green clearance process, Menon told Upstream.

"Although OIL has claimed that they took permissions under the 2006 Notification, projects under this sector have required a detailed scientific appraisal and a public hearing from the 1990s when this notification came

into existence," she said. India has witnessed a number of environmental infractions due to project operations going awry, including several during the coronavirus lockdown alone, Menon said.

"We haven't learnt the most crucial lesson from past disasters, which is that the decision-making on projects, including the procedures for clearances, have to carefully assess every project for the risks it poses to workers, to neighbourhoods and to ecologies.

"These assessments take time and have to be done thoroughly by independent experts who are not under political pressure to do the government's bidding.

"In the Indian context, this very important process of assessing the risks of projects is done in a very rushed and slapdash manner because our governments don't want to turn away project investments or are concerned about short-term economic goals," she said.

India's central government recently passed an amendment whereby oil and gas exploration can be

undertaken without a full environmental assessment and public consultation. "It is certainly not the right move, mainly because this seems to have been done at the behest of some large company that is interested in exploration in Tamil Nadu," noted Menon.

In the past, energy players have lobbied government to reduce the legal standard of environmental assessments, she said.

Many public sector utilities keep petitioning the government to declare that none of these procedures should apply to them, as they exist for public interest.

"These are all very absurd arguments if you consider that projects can jeopardise food security, public health and the rights of children to grow up in safe environments.

"But I would put the blame most of all on the economic planners of our country. We continue to use very old and irrelevant logics of economic growth and GDP when we should be exploring new models of ecological prosperity for all our people."