

French 'rotten egg' stench invades England (Update 2)

January 22 2013, by Rory Mulholland

The stench of rotten eggs wafted across Paris and northern France on Tuesday, even reaching across the sea to England, after a gas leak that authorities said was very smelly but entirely harmless.

Headaches, sore throats and nausea were nevertheless among the complaints listed in calls made overnight to emergency lines in Paris by more than 10,000 people worried by the stink that had invaded their streets and homes.

One Paris suburban resident, who asked not to be named, said he and his wife smelt gas when they woke early Tuesday with searing headaches: "I opened the windows and then realised the same smell was outside."

But France's Ecology Minister Delphine Batho, who cut short an official trip to Berlin to rush to the site of the leak, a chemical plant in the picturesque city of Rouen in Normandy, said there was no health risk.

"I'm reassured," she told reporters after visiting the facility.

She told AFP there would be an investigation to "determine the origin and establish whether the company was responsible".

The leak began early Monday at a plant run by Lubrizol, a firm that is part of billionaire US investor Warren Buffett's empire, and within a day its odour had reached millions of people across northern France.

Winds carried the invisible gas around 100 kilometres (60 miles) down the densely populated Seine river valley to Paris, and later northwards over the Channel and into England, where it even reached as far as south London.

"South Kent residents are being asked to keep doors and windows closed due to a gas cloud that is believed to have come across from France," the fire and rescue service in the southeastern English region said.

Katherine Shook, an artist who lives in the 11th district of Paris, said she was woken by her crying baby.

"It was about 4:00 am and I got up and noticed there was a gas smell all through the house. I smelled outside the front door, and it was stronger, so realised it was coming from outside the apartment," she said.

The offending odour came from a gas called mercaptan, which, among other uses, is added to municipal gas because its sulphurous smell alerts people to gas leaks.

The Lubrizol plant, which makes additives for industrial lubricants and paint, shut down production as workers battled to plug the leak.

Regional authorities ordered the postponement of a French Cup tie match in Rouen between the city's football team and Olympique Marseille on Tuesday evening.

"We didn't want to be in a situation where we have 10,000 spectators two kilometres away from the plant without any capacity for confining or evacuating them if that were necessary," said senior local official Florence Gouache.

Despite the official insistence that there was no danger, French social

media were awash with people in the affected regions complaining of headaches and nausea from the gas that smelled like rotten eggs.

"They're all saying not to panic, but they said the same thing about the cloud from Chernobyl," said mother-of-four Patricia Cousteau, referring to radioactive fallout that spread across Europe in 1986 after an explosion at a Ukrainian nuclear plant.

Authorities said in an earlier statement that a chemical substance at the Lubrizol plant became unstable and caused odours that are similar to those of town gas.

"The gas has an unpleasant smell but is not toxic," it said. The concentration of the gas was also "very low", said the statement, which also admitted that "a large number of people have been inconvenienced".

By Tuesday afternoon the smell had largely disappeared in Paris.

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