

Enough Is Enough: Put People Before Profits

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By Roger Kim and Jakada Imani

Last Monday night, we watched in horror as a huge explosion and [fire erupted](#) at the Chevron Refinery in Richmond, CA. Richmond is a city where more than a quarter of the residents live below the federal poverty line, and more than [85 percent](#) of the residents are listed as "minorities" by the U.S. census. As the Executive Directors of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, we have too long watched big companies pollute the earth and endanger their workers and communities all in the name of profit.

We have watched for years as Chevron has put its profits ahead of the well-being and safety of people. They have fought to expand their facility without necessary safeguards for the community's health. Most of this has come at the expense of people of color and low-income families who are the majority of the residents of Richmond.

Both of us and the organizations we represent, know too well about the well-documented health disparities for people of color and poor people. We also recognize that Chevron, the single largest stationary source of greenhouse gas emissions in California, may be part of the reason why Richmond and the county it is located in have had record high rates of asthma, respiratory disease and cancer even before this incident took place.

APEN leaders worked for years with the county to adopt a multi-lingual warning system to keep children, the elderly and infirmed safe in the case of a Chevron disaster. Yet Monday night, the system failed to properly notify all residents, and even today many continue to experience dizziness, headaches, skin irritations and other symptoms of being exposed to some of the most lethal toxins man has created.

At a [Town Meeting](#) on Tuesday, Chevron, city and County officials offered apologies to an angry community. While Chevron has accepted blame for the incident and set up a claims process to cover medical and property costs incurred by residents, more work is needed to prevent future disasters.

Though we are not shocked, we are saddened that it takes a disaster such as this fire to truly see how dirty the business of big oil is. Every day people who live near refineries breathe polluted air, yet oil companies continue to oppose efforts for accountability and continue to put their bottom line ahead of the health and well being of their neighbors.

Their drive for profits has global impact. In fact, the night of the fire, Chevron faced [a midnight deadline](#) to pay \$19.04 billion to the people of Ecuador for environmental damages in the Amazon region. A sum that the company has not yet agreed to pay.

In this economy, one might wonder if Chevron can afford to be accountable to the lives it affects. Yet, so far in 2012, Chevron has made [\\$13.7 billion](#) in profits. That should be a big enough windfall that the company could have upgraded old equipment, which may have prevented the fire and could now cover the health-related expenses of those impacted by the fire. We hope that Chevron, for once, will do the right thing and commit to full transparency and accountability in the wake of the fire -- [we demand](#) that they follow through with us.

But it's not just about this one tragedy. Monday's fire wasn't the first accident at the Chevron Richmond Refinery. In the last five years there have been two explosions that have sent thousands of people to the hospital.

At the same time, the earth's oil supply is decreasing. Chevron and its peers continue to wring out every cent of profit they can from the Earth's reserves at the expense of the survival of our people and our planet. Investment in renewable and alternative energies has never been more important, nor has efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

In the long term, we hope Chevron will face the reality that the age of oil is over and step up as a champion of AB32 (California's landmark greenhouse gas emissions law) and other efforts to help California transition to a just and sustainable green economy.

We all stand to benefit when we put people and our planet ahead of excessive profits.