



**Asian Pacific
Environmental Network**

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In the shadow of the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, thousands of Laotian refugees live, work, and go to school. Over the last 16 years APEN has been developing the leadership and power of low-income Laotian refugees in Richmond. The story of our organization and the Laotian community members we organize is one that illustrates the evolution of our society's relationship with big oil and provides hope for a more healthy and just planet.

In close proximity to Chevron's Richmond refinery, nearly 80% of the community residents are people of color, 25% live below the federal poverty level, and a majority is working class. The Laotian refugee community fled war and upheaval in their home country, survived tough conditions in refugee camps, and endured racism and hardship in the United States. As they struggled to build a life in Richmond, they also became acquainted with the hazards of living near a refinery.

"I've been in Richmond pretty much all my life. I was one of the many children who grew up in North Richmond. With its low-income housing, it was our only option at the time. Now, I work just blocks from the Chevron refinery. As I watch the fumes roll out of Chevron's smokestacks, I vaguely remember having to "shelter in place" as a child during fires, explosions, and other emergencies, closing our doors and windows hoping not to breathe in the toxics. It always seems to be our neighborhoods, low-income communities of color that suffer when big corporations want to build, expand, and pollute our cities," said Lena Phan.

Another resident has testified, "My name is Christina Saeteurn, I am 22 years old, and I live in Richmond, CA. I was born and raised here in Richmond, and I've never lived anywhere else. I've made many memories here throughout the years; one memory in particular that I will never forget took place at my elementary school, when we used to do routine drills in case of an oil spill from the local Chevron oil refinery. We were directed to line up single file with a piece of napkin over our nose and mouth as the teacher walked us over to a specific area. I was about 5 or 6 years old, so at the time I didn't really know how these chemicals are so harmful to a young child's body. To think about it now, is very scary, a piece of napkin was going to save my body from the toxic that was spreading through the air?"

Over time, the community learned about the environmental pollution and health effects associated with living near the Chevron refinery. Data illustrate that children living in Richmond are already hospitalized for asthma at almost twice the rate of children in the rest of the county and more than double the national average.

In 1999, there was a major chemical explosion at the Richmond refinery. As people watched the toxic fumes spilling out, the government's inadequate emergency response system was not able to reach the Laotian community. Many of the residents did not understand the emergency safety procedures, exposing them to hazards that sent them to the emergency room. "I remember the refinery's explosion in the 1990s; I experienced strong headache and dizziness," says Koy Seng Saechao. "Sometimes, I still experience headaches and irritation of my eyes. It is hard for me to breathe and my body aches."

Koi Meng Saeteurn also remembers, "Throughout my 20 plus years living in Richmond, I've experienced many struggles and hardships, especially during the earlier years of coming to America. There were many incidents when the local refinery Chevron had chemical spills, and during that time I had no idea what was going on, I spoke no English, there were no warnings in my language to notify me as to what was happening, and I had no clue whatsoever how to keep my children and I safe. I was terrified for my kids; I didn't know what to do, or how to react to something like this. I had 2 young children playing outside while the others were at school and the thought of them being scared and alone killed me. That day will never be erased in my mind."

In response to the explosions and the lack of information to protect them, APEN and our Laotian members launched a campaign targeting Contra Costa County's Health Services and Board of Supervisors to implement a multilingual emergency phone-alert system. After a



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lengthy campaign, the community secured a historic victory when the County established such a system.

The community soon realized that warnings weren't enough. Being notified after an accident or explosion did nothing to prevent the serious health impacts on Richmond residents. APEN members then decided that they needed to limit the air pollution and toxins that were occurring at its source. As Gloria Chaleunsky has said, "Personally, I grew up in Richmond/San Pablo area and understand the effects of chemical spills, refinery explosion, and hazardous leaky pipes on the overall health of people, animals, and foliage. We were told not to plant food in our backyard because the soil was lined with lead and mercury. We hear and see chemical explosions that burn for hours. The heart of Richmond is surrounded by rolling hills where the wind does not blow westward toward the bay but instead trap pollutants that hover over residential areas."

In 2005, Chevron wanted to expand the Richmond oil refinery, despite the evidence of increased harm for people living in the vicinity. The community strongly organized to oppose this expansion. When that didn't work because of the influence that Chevron had over the City Council at the time, the community took Chevron to court....and won twice! Community residents had stopped a multinational corporation from bringing more pollution and negative health impacts to their neighborhoods.

Now, community residents have realized that it's not enough to simply stop the expansion of the refinery, but that the city needs a completely new alternative – a system of renewable energy that is community-generated to provide justice and equity for our planet and our people. No longer is it enough to simply provide warnings of the explosions or to limit the expansion of the refinery – It is time to demand changing the entire system of powering this planet.

APEN and our members are embarking on a new journey to energize the planet using renewable sources and making investments to local communities through distributed generation of energy and local green jobs. We will create a system that is not only environmentally sustainable, but also socially just; a system that puts people before profits so that all can benefit and not only an elite and wealthy few. Instead of the \$29 billion annual corporate profits going to a small group of Chevron shareholders, we can have a system that is community-led and –generated, provides much needed jobs and investments to community residents, and does not pollute the planet.

Chevron, you have much to fear. People understand that addressing climate change will also require addressing the deep inequalities and injustices that are fueling the destruction of our planet and people. As a movement unites around a common agenda of climate and economic justice, wake up to the changes that are happening, and get out of the way.

ROGER KIM
Executive Director
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Roger Kim is the Executive Director of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). APEN organizes and builds the leadership of low-income Asian immigrant and refugee communities to achieve environmental and social justice. APEN has successfully developed cutting-edge community organizing models in Richmond and Oakland, and is now building power statewide in California. APEN's members have won precedent setting environmental justice campaigns and have educated and mobilized thousands of Asian immigrant voters in their native languages on key ballot issues statewide. APEN is a nationally recognized leader in the fields of environmental and social justice, and civic participation.

Mr. Kim brings his background in the social justice, environmental, and philanthropic sectors to the environmental justice mission APEN. Before becoming APEN's executive director, he was previously the organization's associate director and policy director. Mr. Kim currently chairs the board of the Center for Environmental Health, co-chairs the Advisory Committee to Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and is a board member of Oakland Rising.