

Post Beirut blast, norms to be tightened for handling of explosive grade chemicals

Our Bureau Palak Shah / Rahul Wadke Mumbai | Updated on August 09, 2020 Published on August 09, 2020

The chemical manufacturing industry is bracing up for enhanced supervision and handling norms with regard to substances that come close to explosive grade.

Chemical manufacturers are expecting the government to issue stricter norms for handling of 'ammonium nitrate (AN),' the explosive chemical that led to a mini nuclear-like blast in Beirut recently. Even handling of phosphorous, a chemical used for manufacturing of matchsticks and fire crackers, is being critically evaluated, sources said.

The enhanced norms would bring in caps on manufacturing and storage of explosive grade chemicals, especially AN, depending upon the size of the company, industry sources said.

Also, it is likely that transportation of AN within India would require the transporter to give prior information about the movement of the material to the local police, the sources said. At present police escort is not mandatory for the vehicles carrying AN for movement in regular areas.

In 2011, the manufacturing of AN was completely banned after it was revealed that the chemical was used in several bomb blasts. Subsequently, the Nagpur-based Petroleum and Explosive Safety Organisation (PESO), which comes under the Department For Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade of the Commerce Ministry, came out with basic norms for handling of AN.

As per PESO rules there are certain basic security provisions like boundary-wall of the premises, locking of godowns, guards, escorting of consignments by guards, escorting in sensitive areas, etc. for AN. The sources said AN manufactures are required to file monthly returns, which is supposed to be tallied with the company's balance-sheet but the supervision requires tightening as not all manufacturers file such monthly returns.

Senior officials in Central and State agencies said that the regular movement, pilferage and theft of AN has always been on the radar of the agencies and more so in the last one year. Because of the Beirut explosion, the process of taking an inventory of unused stocks has also started. The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs has also issued an order to the Customs Department seeking urgent reports of stocks of AN held up or detained in ports and port-based warehouses across the country. The field staff of the Customs Department has been ordered to verify the stocks, the officials said.

The Alkali Manufacturers Association of India (AMAI) has already asked its members to deal with caution on explosive grade materials.

"Chlor-alkali industry, a key segment of the chemicals sector, deals in some of the hazardous and explosive chemicals such as Chlorine and Hydrogen manufactured as bye-products. As a new protocol, Chlor-alkali units are reviewing and tightening measures, including SOPs for verifying the validity of licenses held by their consumers/dealers for products such as Hydrogen and Chlorine and also if the consumers/dealers have adequate facilities/infrastructure for safe handling and storage of these chemicals. AMAI has already set up a Chlorine Emergency Response Network," said Jayantibhai Patel, President of AMAI.

AMAI further said it will provide training in safe handling and transportation of all chlor-alkali products.



Officials at the site where ammonium nitrate was stored at Sattva Container Freight Station (CFS) Manali in North Chennai for nearly five years. The chemical was split into 10 container sets and transported to a Hyderabad-based buyer on Sunday.
Photo: The Hindu - THE HINDU