

- **Where:** Italy, Seveso (Milan);
- **When:** July 10, 1976;
- **What:** CBRN Agent Released: **Chemical**;
- **Who:** Actor(s) involved: Private Corporation
- **Why:** CBRN Event: Accidental



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THE SEVESO DISASTER

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The facts

In Seveso – about 10 km north of Milan – a reactor located in the chemical plant owned by ICMESA, subsidiary of pharmaceutical giant Hoffman-La Roche (an intermediary for cosmetics and pharmaceuticals), started to malfunction while the plant was shut for the weekend. Cooling mechanisms had been turned off and could not contrast the rise in temperature.

A pressure release valve opened, and about six metric tons of toxic gas was emitted from the facility. The resulting gas cloud that drifted over the Seveso area contained an estimated one kilogram of TCDD, technically known as 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzodioxin.

Immediate effects comprised the death of about 3,300 animals (mostly poultry and rabbits) and the contamination of the food chain. Long-term health effects include, for instance, increased breast cancer, fetus malformation, reduced female and male fertility.

Legal response

- Seveso Directive I (Council Directive 82/501/EEC);
- Seveso Directive II (Council Directive 96/82/EC);
- [Seveso Directive III](#) (*Directive 2012/18/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 4 July 2012 on the control of major-accident hazards involving dangerous substances, amending and subsequently repealing Council Directive 96/82/EC*).

Seveso Directive III applies to more than 12.000 industrial establishments across the EU, which makes it one of the major instruments dealing with accidental release of chemical substances in Member States. It establishes obligations both for private operators and Member States.

Selected case-law

[Cassazione civile, SS.UU., sentenza 21/02/2002 n° 2515](#)

After lengthy proceedings (20 years), the Italian Supreme Court recognized compensation to a Seveso resident not only for direct material damages deriving from the release of dioxin, but also for the moral damages (stress, panic, anxiety) suffered after the disaster.

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Related legal tools:

- [CLP Regulation](#);
- [Decision 2019/420](#) (EU civil protection mechanism)
- [Basel Convention on Hazardous Waste](#)

Further readings:

- <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/seveso/> (EU dedicated webpage)
- <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/disaster-of-seveso> (Environmental Justice Atlas, University of Barcelona)

Audio-visual materials:

- [The Seveso Affair](#) (Associated Press)

Witness Reports:

- Laura Conti, *Visto da Seveso* (Feltrinelli 1977)
- Laura Conti, *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* (Editori Riuniti, 1978)
- Vittorio Carreri, *La fabbrica sporca* (Sometti 2017)

About this publication

This memo is the outcome of research carried out in the scope of the project CBRN-ITALY on International legal obligations related to Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery from CBRN events and status of their implementation in Italy.

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The project aims at developing a common understanding of CBRN events and of actors involved (stage 1), at mapping obligations stemming from the wide range of applicable norms of International Law and European Union Law (stage 2), at exploring the implementation of applicable international obligations in Italy (stage 3) and at providing recommendations to address the gaps in the International, European and Italian legal and policy frameworks in all phases of the CBRN emergency management cycle (stage 4). The research activities are thus structured around four stages: 1. Definitions, 2. Mapping International and Regional Obligations, 3. Assessing the situation in Italy, 4. Providing recommendations.

For further information on the PRIN Project CBRN-ITALY, please visit:

<http://www.cbrn-italy.it/en>

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