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32 children overcome by river's fumes

By CHARLES LEWIS and NIGEL ROSSER

THIRTY-TWO school children were rushed to hospital yesterday afternoon after inhaling fumes believed to have come from chemicals dumped into the polluted Ho Chung River near their Sai Kung school.

The children, aged between nine and 12, were taken to United Christian Hospital. A 10-year-old girl was admitted in satisfactory condition while the others were treated and discharged.

Last night an environmental expert said the children could have been overcome by potentially lethal hydrogen sulphide gases emitted from Sai Kung's "Black river".

Hydrogen sulphide, which gives off a distinctive rotten eggs smell and can be fatal if inhaled in a closed atmosphere, can be released after bacteria breaks down sulphur compounds in polluted water.

Yesterday's incident occurred shortly after 2 pm when teachers say a foul smelling gas struck the Sai Kung Central Primary School in Ho Chung Road while about 400 students were attending classes.

Students in their classrooms on the second and third floors of the six-storey school building complained to their teachers of feeling ill, dizzy and vomiting.

The school's headmaster, Mr Yip Kim-yau, immediately evacuated all the students from their classrooms and led them to the open playground.

The Education Department was informed and police and firemen were called to the school. A Government chemist also visited the scene.

Mr Yip said: "The 32 students who felt unwell were ferried to United Christian Hospital and only a primary five pupil was admitted for observation. Parents of the pupils were also informed."

Education Department and Environmental Protection Department (EPD) officers, including the Fire Services Department yesterday spent about an hour trying to locate the origin of the odour but were unsuccessful, he said.

"Environmental Protection Department officers later took samples of water from the polluted nullah for tests," he said.

Mr Yip said since the school opened four years ago, they had regularly encountered foul smells coming from the river. But yesterday's fumes were the worst they could remember.

The problem of foul odours from the river had been brought to the attention of the school authorities in the past but nothing had been done to remedy the problem so far, Mr Yip said.

"Before the school was built in 1984, I was told by various members of the district board and district office that the river was a catchment of waste water from several dyeing factories situated opposite the school which would be covered up,"

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Children rushed to hospital

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he said. "But the project was abandoned by the Government."

Mr Yip added he was told by EPD officers that samples of the waste water from the dyeing factories were tested monthly but were found to comply with official requirements.

"Following today's (Tuesday) incident I hope to bring the problem up again to district board members and the district office," Mr Yip said.

Residents of Sai Kung have long complained about the state of the river, with reports of schools of dead fish floating on the surface of the nearby marina which periodically would be turned an orange colour by the oxygenless nullah water.

Dyeing factories, small car workshops and a printing premises have been blamed for the state of the pitch black water.

In July the Government gave a dyeing factory six months to install adequate industrial waste treatment facilities after it was said to have consistently pumped hot effluent into the river.

A re-entry notice on the factory was issued and it was given six months to comply with waste disposal regulations or the Government owned site would be repossessed. Two other dyeing factory's in the area have closed down in the past year.

Last April Assistant Director of the Environmental Protection Department Mr Robert Law said the Government was confident the river's water quality would be improved "in the not too distant future".