Now, the burning questions

Krishna-Godavari basin blaze under control, but damage to ONGC's image isn't

Amanath K. Menon | March 31, 1995 | UPDATED 17:55 IST

After more than 60 days, endless dilly-dallying and crores of rupees in losses, it may be curtains for the bizarre drama at the Pasarlapudi 19 drilling site in the Krishna-Godavari basin of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC).

The flames have finally been extinguished, but the blowout - now recorded as the biggest blaze in the history of the Indian oil industry - leaves behind a trail of smoke and unanswered questions that will not easily be stamped out.

Chief among them is why the ONGC took two months to put out the flame which, experts believe, should have been doused within a fortnight. Although there is no setback to the country's overall annual gas production of 17,000 million cubic metres, the Pasarlapudi blowout has exposed just how ill-equipped the ONGC is at handling such a crisis.

There is still no official explanation of what well to go up in flames on January 8 this year. Or an assessment of environmental damage it may have caused in the area. That the fire could have been put out much earlier was demonstrated by the speed with which the team from the International Well Control (IWC), along with the ONGC, brought the situation under control.

The IWC - consisting of specialists taken largely from the disbanded but legendary Red Adair team - was called in to help only on February 26. The earlier international team of consultants, the Houston-based Neil Adams Fire Fighters (NAF), had just left the site in a huff claiming that the ONGC had been hindering their efforts to put out the blaze.

After assessing the situation, the four-man IWC team, led by Raymond Henry and the ONGC's Crisis Management Team (CMT) of 50 men headed by K. Satyanarayana, quickly got down to the business of putting out the flame.

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<th>Chronology of the Mismanagement</th>
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<td>Jan 8,1995 Massive fire breaks out at the ONGC gas well number 19 at Pasarlapudi. ONGC says it is not so serious and is confident of capping the well.</td>
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<td>Jan 12-29 Neil Adams Fire Fighters (NAF) hired to control the fire. Suggests</td>
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shape, making it difficult for the team to assess the seriousness of the
damage to the wellhead.

Drilling for gas is similar to sinking a borewell for water, except that once it
is struck, a sophisticated capping assembly has to be mounted on its
mouth. Having the same function as a regulator in a domestic cooking gas
cylinder, the 15-tonne assembly also has a blowout preventer built into
it. When the newly drilled well in Pasarlupudi blew up, the debris of its
capping assembly ensured that gas leaked from several breaches, making controlling the flame difficult. The IWC team decided that it was better to clear the debris first and then cap the fire (see diagram). Using a specially designed machine called a Halliburton sand cutter, which sprays silica and water at tremendous force, the team was able to shatter the well-head.

As a result, it succeeded in regulating the flame to a narrow vertical profile,
making approach to the well-head easier. After water cannons failed to quell the fire, the team recommended lowering explosions into the flame to suck up all the oxygen and put out the fire. When small quantities failed, the team used a massive 550 kg of explosives. That did the trick. For the first time in weeks, dusk and silence fell on Pasarlupudi.

Simple, or so it may seem. But while a bleary-eyed yet beaming Satyanarayana in maroon overalls emblazoned with the ONGC-CMT insignia, expressed "immense relief", he couldn't but have been more conscious of the fact that this phase of the operation should have been wrapped up weeks ago.

And all is not over even yet. The well-head will now have to be examined before a fresh capping assembly can be lowered. Lines will have to be laid to take the still leaking gas to some distance before the well is entirely capped. The cost so far: ₹21.44 crore in fire-control expenses and another ₹20 crore lost on the rig and the flaring gas. So, although the inferno in the Krishna-Godavari basin of Andhra Pradesh has not taken any human lives, the ONGC's image has been one major casualty. Unless it comes up with some answers soon, the allegations of inefficiency and poor fire-fighting preparedness will obviously stick. "The gods were not with us," is the explanation of ONGC's General Manager M. Rangarajan. "We were actually under greater pressure from some politicians and the press." For a commission that became a corporation just last year, such buck-passing seems strangely out of place. Ironically, the ONGC had initially appeared to be moving swiftly as the NAF - which successfully tackled the 1993 fire at Komarada, also in the Godavari basin - arrived on the scene just four days after the fire started. But efforts by the NAF to douse the flame by directing water cannons at it or using plastic explosives failed.

The NAF had, in fact, wanted to dig a relief well that would have diverted the flow of the gas, enabling the team to subsequently cap it. But the ONGC deferred that option, saying that it was too expensive and should be done only as a last resort.
And these emerging differences of opinion on the subject of a relief well and other aspects of the operation defeated the initial promptness and stalled everything. "If the drilling of the relief well had begun before January 15, the flaming well would be dead by now," was Adams's claim, as he moved out of Pasarlapudi.

"This is not a case of a bad workman complaining about his tools, but trying to make more money through commissions on imports and other deals," countered a senior ONGC official, reiterating the corporation's allegation that Adams was considering this expensive option mainly because it would add to his profit. As the two parties trade charges, the fact remains that both are responsible for some unforgivable lapses. A case in point: NAF specialists and the CMT tried to pull away the well-head with the help of a crane imported for the purpose, only to spring more leaks in it. The ONGC is only pointing a finger at itself when it cries itself hoarse over Adams's unsatisfactory performance, since the hiring, and subsequent firing, of the NAF was ultimately the corporation's responsibility. The entire affair has also drawn attention to what is obviously the ONGC's glaring unpreparedness to tackle such emergencies. The corporation does not even have enough equipment for basic needs. This became evident when Adams initially suggested that the fire be quenched with high-pressure water jets.

The corporation was found to be sadly lacking - it had to bring pumps from its offices and sites around the country and import three more. For an organisation that has dug 152 wells in the Krishna-Godavari basin alone, that speaks volumes of its drawbacks.

-with Anna M.M. Vetticad

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