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Judge orders BP to identify substance that made workers ill

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HOUSTON — A judge on Wednesday ordered BP PLC to identify the allegedly toxic substance released at its Texas City plant last week that sent about 100 employees to the hospital.

In connection with a personal injury lawsuit filed earlier this week, U.S. District Court Judge Samuel Kent also ordered BP to preserve all evidence — including correspondence and readings from measuring devices — related to the leak.

But a spokesman for the company said BP "found no evidence of leak or contamination" in their investigation of the April 19 incident.

"We're continuing to investigate," said BP spokesman Scott Dean.

The refinery, about 30 miles southeast of Houston, was the site of a 2005 explosion that killed 15 people and injured 170 — the worst U.S. industrial accident since 1990.

Air monitors maintained by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality did not register any emissions, said TCEQ spokesman Terry Clawson.

The company sent the workers to the hospital out of an "abundance of caution" because they complained of flu-like symptoms, Dean said. They were part of a group of about 400 working on a crude distillation unit that's been shut down since Hurricane Rita hit the Gulf Coast in 2005.

Attorney Tony Buzbee said the injuries of his client, BP contractor Aaron Garner, are typical of concentrated exposure to a toxic chemical: severe headaches, painful breathing, nausea and dizziness.

"How can you be properly treated if you don't even know what you were exposed to?" Buzbee said. "Until they tell us, there's no way for us to know. It's really created a lot of resentment on behalf of a lot of people."

By the end of the week, Buzbee said he expects 20 more people to join the personal injury suit, which was filed Monday and alleges negligence by BP.

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