

ANOTHER BIG BANG IN JAPANESE CHEMICALS

TOKYO — Reeling from the five explosions which made "Black October", the Japanese chemicals and polymer industry has suffered yet another plant explosion — at the vinyl chloride monomer facility of Shin-Etsu Co at Kubiki.

This latest disaster makes the VCM and pvc situation in the country even worse than it was, and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry has asked for further cut-backs in export allocations for the remaining quarter of the year.

There is even talk of the need to import material, to provide supplies for the home market.

Earlier, following the big explosion at Idemitsu on July 7, MITI directed that VCM and pvc exports for the July-September period should be restricted from 30,000 tonnes to only 10,000 tonnes.

The Idemitsu explosion, according to a Government-appointed investigation committee — which has just reported its findings — was due to failure of operatives and technicians to notice a rapidly-climbing temperature reading.

Prof Tsuyoshi Hikida, leading the committee, concludes that workmen mishandled valves on the plant and responded inadequately to "a suddenly abnormal situation".

Blamed too were technicians who inefficiently handled the computer-controlled plant temperature readings.

An operative reading the instruments on a hydrogen

valve mishandled it and another workman failed to close the valve completely.

Nobody noticed the rising temperature, which caused a high-temperature gas to heat up to over 1000°C, which ruptured the pipe in the tower through which it passed, and the gas leaked out, catching fire and causing the explosion.