

AT midnight on December 2, 1984, over 40 tones of deadly Methyl Isocyanate, Hydrogen Cyanide and other gases leaked from a hazardously designed and recklessly managed pesticide factory in Bhopal owned by US based multinational Union Carbide Corporation. Over five lakh men, women, and children were exposed to the poison clouds produced by the gases. At least 6,000 people died within the first week of the disaster. The current death toll is well over 16,000 and is rising. Thirteen years later, the medical situation in Bhopal continues to be grim.

Hundreds of thousands of survivors continue to suffer from multi-systemic injuries caused by exposure to toxic gases. The search for specific lines of effective treatment for the survivors' illness has been impeded due to withholding of medical information by Union Carbide and has long been abandoned by the Indian government. The government has failed abysmally in the provision of economic, social, and environmental rehabilitation. The officials and agencies primarily responsible for the industrial genocide continue to abscond as the Indian government drags its feet over their extradition.

According to the latest reports of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), nearly one-fourth of the exposed population is chronically ill. Exposure to Carbide's gases has made people vulnerable to secondary infections. According to the ICMR, the incidence of tuberculosis in the affected population is more than three times higher than the national figure for urban population. Chromosomal aberrations in an unusually large number of gas affected persons found earlier in an ICMR study point towards congenital malformations among the future generations of the survivors.

With the termination of all ICMR research projects on the long term

Criminal Neglect

An Update on the Union Carbide Disaster in Bhopal

medical impacts of the disaster in 1994, research and monitoring activities have been virtually abandoned. The Government of Madhya Pradesh had undertaken to continue with the work of monitoring the health status of the survivors of the disaster through the Centre for Rehabilitation Studies, Bhopal. However, the centre has not published any report on their medical condition. There is almost no current data on persistent exposure related morbidity and the prevalence of tuberculosis, cancer and infertility among the exposed population—all of which are reported to be on the rise by doctors involved with the treatment of the survivors. The official set up for monitoring exposure related deaths was disbanded in December 1992.

For the last several months almost no medicines are available to the gas victims at any of the five hospitals and eight clinics meant for them. People who do not have money sufficient for their basic needs are asked to buy medicines and even syringes and IV sets by doctors at these institutions that are supposed to provide free medical care. The records relating to the stock position of medicines as on October 15, 1997, at one of these institutions, Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital, situated close to the most severely affected area, showed that 78.95 per cent of the medicines required to be supplied to patients were out of stock. The records further showed that only three out of 114 medicines were available in quantities anywhere close to the



Victims of Bhopal gas tragedy Photo: Raghu Rai, India Today

requirement for the next three months. Records relating to the stock position of medicines available with the Chief Medical and Health Officer (Gas Relief), as on October 17, 1997, showed that 57.15 per cent of the medicines required to be supplied to patients were out of stock. Over 70 per cent of the equipment in the hospitals and clinics under the Department of Gas Relief was dysfunctional. Most were in need of repair. Accessories were missing in several hospitals and no one knows or cares about how to get them in working order. Among the numerous pieces of equipment meant for diagnosis and monitoring of exposure related illnesses that lied unused, the Gould Cardio Respiratory System had been awaiting repairs at Jawahar Lal Nehru Hospital since 1990. The defibrillator with Cardioscope had been lying idle at Master Lal Singh Hospital since 1992. The X-Ray machine (100 MMR) was dysfunctional at Rukmabai Hospital since 1989. The Pulmonary Function Test and Exercise Tolerance Test unit at Shakir Ali Khan Hospital was out of order since 1992. In one hospital, the Pulmonary Medicine Centre, there was equipment worth Rs 1.25 crore that was lying unutilised from the time it was purchased.

Little attention has been paid towards developing appropriate protocols for medical care in these hospitals. The type of medical treatment made available to the survivors has remained essentially unchanged since the morning of the disaster when nothing was known about the poisonous gases. Union Carbide continues to withhold information on the full composition of the leaked gases and their long term affects on the human body. In the absence of this information doctors in Bhopal continue to prescribe antibiotics, steroids and psychotropic drugs indiscriminately which provide only temporary relief, if any at all. A

study undertaken by the International Medical Commission on Bhopal has pointed out that therapies prescribed for the ailing survivors at the government hospitals are aimed at temporary symptomatic relief rather than long term amelioration of chronic disease processes. The inadequacies of the government's health care system have led to a flourishing business for private medical practitioners. In the severely affected areas nearly 70 per cent of the private doctors are not even sufficiently qualified, yet they form the mainstay of medical care in Bhopal.

Despite continued opposition by survivors' organisations, the state government has begun handing over the eight community clinics to the Bhopal Hospital Trust (BHT) set up

In the last two years, trustee and attorney of the Union Carbide Hospital Trust has spent Rs 7 crore on the construction of a 260-bed hospital, which happens to be 8 kms away from the gas affected area, and Rs 5 crore on his own fees, travel and office expenses.

by the Union Carbide Corporation. Preparations for transfer of the four Red Cross clinics are also underway. The source of funds of the BHT is the value of shares of Union Carbide that had been judicially attached to ensure that the representatives of the Corporation face criminal charges related to the disaster. By means of interventions in the Supreme Court through the sole trustee of BHT, Sir Ian Percival (an attorney working for Union Carbide from 1984 to 1992), the Corporation has been able to get the shares dis-attached and continues to ab-

scend justice. In the last two years, Percival has spent Rs 7 crore on the construction of a 260-bed hospital, which happens to be 8 kms away from the gas affected area, and Rs 5 crore on his own, fees, travel and office expenses. BHT seeks to build a humane image for the corporation while helping it to escape justice. Percival's plans for health care administration have been severely criticised by national and international professional groups including the IMCR. Among other misgivings, concerns have been expressed regarding transparency of activities at the proposed medical research centre to be set up by the BHT. Percival's bonafides and his role in administering health care in Bhopal are being challenged in the Supreme Court by Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (BGPMUS), Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA) and Bhopal Gas Peedit Sangharsh Sahayog Samiti (BGPSSS).

About 30 per cent of injury claims have been rejected and there are well over 4 lakh claimants whose cases remain to be decided. Of the 15,168 death claims, 3,891 adjudicated have been rejected and an average sum of Rs 67,267 has been paid as compensation on 11,267 cases. While it is true that the paltry total settlement amount (US \$470 million) paid by Union Carbide provides little scope for awarding adequate compensation sums, much injustice is being done by judges in the claims tribunals whose knowledge of the health consequences of exposure to Carbide's gases is extremely limited. Damages caused to the mental health of the survivors are not considered compensable and children born to gas-exposed women, who are found to be suffering from retarded physical and mental growth, have been given no right to claim compensation. Wrongful denial of compensation, corruption at all stages, delays and

the tortuous procedure through which these persons have to establish their victimisation continue to make the whole process of compensation an unending nightmare.

Despite the expenditure of over Rs 60 crore from the public exchequer less than 100 persons have found gainful employment through official initiatives. There are an estimated 50,000 people who have been so incapacitated due to their exposure to Carbide's gases that they can no longer pursue their usual jobs. The state government, in an apparent attempt to disown its responsibilities towards the rehabilitation of incapacitated survivors, had distributed worksheds to 16 non-governmental organisations who had undertaken to start income generating activities through employment of survivors within 90 days. More than a year has passed and only three of them have begun functioning so far. Of the 152 worksheds built in the Special Industrial Area, 52 are in the possession of the Rapid Action Force and are being used as barracks by this paramilitary

organisation. These sheds built at a cost of Rs 8 crore (US\$2.3 million) were originally meant exclusively for the employment of over 10,000 gas affected people in the garments, food processing and electronics industries. Not one gas affected person has found employment in the Special Industrial Area so far. Two hundred gas-affected women have recently been selected for a 3-month training course in production of jute handicrafts without any plans for where they will be able to obtain employment after being trained. Earlier this year, the state government announced plans to start colleges of medicine and engineering for the rehabilitation of gas victims. However, 30 per cent of them are illiterate and only 12 per cent have received a secondary school education, according to the survey carried out by the ICMR.

Officials have paid no attention to the urgent need of life long pension for widows, orphans, chronically ill, disable survivors and provision of nutritional supplements to children in gas affected families on a regular basis. The Supreme Court's final order

of October 3, 1991, to provide insurance coverage to about one lakh children likely to suffer the delayed affects of the lethal gases is also being ignored by the central government.

Safe drinking water, sanitation and a healthy living environment remain inaccessible to a majority of the gas victims despite the expenditure of over Rs 80 crore by the government on environmental rehabilitation in the past 13 years. Funds earmarked for provision of environmental rehabilitation in the gas affected area have been spent on building roads, street lighting and other structures outside the gas affected area. There has been no improvement in the living environment of the gas affected communities. Communities in the vicinity of the Carbide factory continue to be exposed to toxic chemicals that are injurious to lungs, liver and kidneys and can cause cancer. This is a result of routine dumping of hazardous chemicals during the operation of the factory by the management contaminating the soil and groundwater in and around the factory premises.



Bhopal gas victims protesting in front of Union Carbide factory, Bhopal, on March 6, 1990

Analysis carried out by the Citizens Environmental Laboratory (CEL), Boston, show the presence of toxic chemicals in the community wells around the factory. A collaborative investigation by Arthur D. Little Inc. (retained by the Union Carbide Corporation, USA) and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), Nagpur, (retained by the Union Carbide India Limited) has confirmed the findings of CEL and recommended a fuller investigation for better assessment of the environmental contamination. Meanwhile the company management has dug up the bottom sludge from the Solar Evaporation Ponds and buried the heavily contaminated material under three metres of farm soil in an apparent bid to cover up evidence of environmental damage.

Our Demands

We seek your solidarity with our struggle and support to the following demands :

○ The Government of India should stop the mishandling of the prosecution of those responsible for the disaster by the current set up in the Central Bureau of Investigation. A special cell with adequate legal, technical and scientific competence and open to participation by representatives of survivors must be set up by the government to supervise the prosecution of the accused corporations and officials.

○ The Government of India must set up a National Medical Commission on Bhopal for long-term medical treatment, health monitoring and economic rehabilitation of the survivors. The commission must be provided with adequate authority and funds and must include non-government professionals and representatives of survivors organisations.

○ The Government of India should resume the official monitoring of ex-

posure related deaths in the gas affected communities and publish the final reports of the Indian Council of Medical Research on the long-term health consequences of the Union Carbide disaster.

○ The Government of India must appoint an autonomous body including representatives of survivors and non-government professionals to take control over the funds of the Bhopal Hospital Trust and oversee the entire administration of health care among the survivors.

○ The Government of India should appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate into the corruption, maladministration and wastage of public funds in the official programmes of relief and rehabilitation in Bhopal.

○ The Government of India should take remedial measures to address routine injustice, delay and corruption in the disbursement of compensation. The government must direct a proper judicial review of all personal injury and death claim cases where injustice is manifest.

○ The Government of India should take steps to assess the environmental damage caused by the contamination of ground water and soil in and around the Union Carbide factory and ensure that the survivors in the neighbourhood communities are protected from these toxic contaminants.

(Extracts from a report by Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan and Bhopal Group for Information and Action) □

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