

# Night of the gas: Bhopal India



Article on the worst industrial disaster in the world, the gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal India. The leak, caused by non-existent safety operations would kill or mutilate over 25,000 people and continues to poison the area and the population to this day.

It's 18 years since the world's worst industrial accident at a transnational corporation's pesticide plant in Bhopal, India - but the poor are being poisoned by it to this day. Meanwhile the Indian Government is sitting on funds intended for compensation and clean-up. Luke David tells a shameful tale.

Most people were at home sleeping when the tank burst out of the earth and stood shuddering on its end, emitting a stream of deadly fumes into the night. The gases came into their houses without warning. They woke choking, their eyes and mouths burning. Nobody knew what had happened. Then came shouts of 'gas!' and 'run away!' People tumbled out of their houses but the gas was waiting for them. It rolled in thick clouds along the narrow lanes, which in some places were little more than a metre wide. The street lamps shed a tobacco-brown light. No insects circled around them - they were already dead.

As families picked up their toddlers and fled, the alleys were filled with stampedes. Cows and dogs ran with their owners. People fell and were trampled. Children were wrenched from their mothers' arms and lost, never to be found.

It was 2 December 1984 and a pesticide factory owned by an American multinational - the Union Carbide Corporation - had leaked 27 tonnes of toxic chemicals into the slums of Bhopal, central India. Ignoring advice by its own experts, Union Carbide built the factory in the middle of densely populated neighbourhoods. In contravention of US safety standards, a huge quantity of lethal methylisocyanate (MIC) was stored on site. The tank holding the MIC was not kept, as the safety manual required, at zero degrees Celsius. The plant's safety systems were dismantled and not working. Water leaked into the giant MIC tank and set off a violent chemical reaction.

Nobody knows exactly how many died but we can form an idea from the 7,000 burial shrouds that were bought over the next three days. This number does not take into account the hundreds of people who were unaccounted for, or the families who had no-one left to bury or cremate them.

The death toll from long-term health problems now stands at 25,000 - and a further 25,000 people in the slums around the factory continue to be poisoned by the chemicals that have been left behind. Women in this community reach their menopause at 30. Children are born with deformities and girls do not menstruate until they are 18. Pigeon chests, webbed feet and growth retardation are frightening realities.

Great piles of chemicals litter the grounds of the former Union Carbide plant, leaching their deadly toxins into the water and poisoning people slowly. No birds sing inside the site, but children play there all the same, among some of the deadliest poisons in existence. Cows and goats graze on pasture contaminated by 26 years of chemical dumping.

Here and there lie piles of reddish-brown rocks, some the size of boulders. These are lumps of Sevin, which has a low ignition point. If it catches light it releases the same gas that killed so many in 1984. Over the last two years there have been several massive fires inside the plant's grounds and some of the Sevin has caught light. Last year fire swept over several hectares and damaged 22 houses in the neighbouring slums. Just as in the 1984 disaster, residents smelt 'burning chillies', their eyes and noses stung, their lungs burned. Some said they were unable to scream because they could only choke and cough.

This time nobody died - but the poor are being poisoned nonetheless. Each rainy season the abandoned chemicals - among them organophosphates and heavy metals - leach into the ground and contaminate the water. A report by Greenpeace International found mercury at between 20,000 and 6,000,000 times the expected levels all over the factory's grounds.

People who have moved into the surrounding slums years after the disaster have the same symptoms as the survivors of the tragedy of 1984. They complain of abdominal pain, skin lesions, dizziness, vomiting, constipation, indigestion and burning sensations in the chest and stomach. The majority of children in the worst-affected areas are born seriously underweight and weak, with discoloured skin. Women don't lactate properly and some stop completely within a month of giving birth. The water they drink is laced with 12 deadly chemicals in concentrations up to 600 times greater than the US Environmental Protection Agency's standard for safety.

Reshma Bi has been ill since the day she was born. Grossly deformed, she cannot walk because her spine is twisted. Her hunched back sticks out for all to see that she is a child of the gas. After Reshma, her mother Kamrunnisa gave birth to another child, who choked on her own vomit and died. On the night of the gas she lost three of her children, who all died in the most horrific way.

Mamta Bai lives in one of the hovels next to the plant. There is a water tank outside her home but it is contaminated with toxins so she walks for two hours every day to collect water from another source. 'Every year one person in my family falls sick,' she says. 'My sister has bad chest pains and my mother has recently been in hospital because of very bad aches and pains all over her body. In the summer months we get a stench that comes from the factory.'

Social worker Dr Ghazala Aftab Ahmed miscarried a few days after the fateful night. The poison remained in her body and was passed on to her next child. Khushnoor ('Happy Light') was born in 1990 and developed problems with her kidneys when she was two years old. In 1993 Dr Ghazala and her husband Aftab had to borrow \$3,000 to pay for Khushnoor to have a life-saving operation. Compensation didn't even pay for the flight to Bombay.

Nearly all the 550,000 people who claimed compensation from Union Carbide were given the equivalent of about \$500 - or 7.5 cents a day for the 18 years of their misery. If someone was killed on the night of the gas their families were paid on average \$1,250 - or 19 cents a day for 18 years.

The Indian Government refused Kaneeza Bi compensation for her husband's death: She has three sons and a daughter. 'My son woke me up on the night of the gas,' she recalls.

'We ran towards the park and I lost two of my children in the rush. We found them two days later, but my husband was found unconscious on the street. His stomach had blown up like a balloon and his eyes were

red and he couldn't open them. He suffered severe breathing problems ever since the gas and died from a heart attack last year, brought on by his breathing problems.' She only received \$4 a month for four years as compensation for her own health problems. 'There is nobody to look after me now my husband is dead,' she says.

Mohammed Idris has received no compensation, though his life has been destroyed. He cannot work or walk for more than five minutes because he becomes breathless. He was recently hospitalized for a month and had to wear an oxygen mask day and night. His wife Aneesa Bi has also been in hospital because of pains in the chest, headaches, vertigo and swelling of her stomach. Mohammed weighs just 34 kilos and cannot eat much because of his sickness - and because he doesn't have enough money for food. He lives with his wife and six children in a tiny two-room hovel in a neighbourhood close to the plant.

Zahid Hafing is another of the victims who has not had any compensation. 'I have never had clear eyesight since that night,' he says. 'Once a month my hands and feet start getting stiff. I get a high temperature and throw up and my eyes hurt. Sometimes I cough so much I feel my life is about to come to an end. At first the Government agreed to give me 7,000 rupees (\$140) over four years but they cancelled it because they said I wasn't born when the tragedy happened.' Zahid was eight years old on the night of the gas.

Union Carbide paid \$470 million after settling out of court with the Indian Government. To this day only \$166 million of it has been given to the people of Bhopal. The rest sits in a bank account in Delhi.

Despite a number of reports and scientific studies, only \$8,300 has been spent on providing a fresh source of water for the slum dwellers. Water tanks have been provided for 2,000 people, but these are only ever half-full and the water inside is far from clean.

The Chief Minister of the local Madhya Pradesh Government declines to comment on why the factory has not been cleaned up. He also cannot say when the 25,000 slum dwellers will get access to clean water.

The man allegedly responsible for the gas leak, Warren Anderson, former chief executive of Union Carbide, has never stood trial. He relaxes in his million-dollar house in New York State, still managing to evade the courts, despite a request for his extradition from Bhopal-magistrates to the US Government. He is charged with culpable homicide and, if found guilty, could serve up to 20 years in prison.

Last July the Indian Government appealed to the Supreme Court to reduce the charges against him from culpable homicide to negligence.[1] If you think this seems an odd response to the contempt he and Union Carbide have shown the Indian justice system, then you should know the following. The new owner of Union Carbide is American giant Dow Chemical, which is one of India's largest foreign investors. Reducing the charges would have effectively extinguished the case against Warren Anderson and absolved Dow from the responsibility for cleaning up the factory, thus wooing Dow's foreign investment.

A further point to consider when judging the Government's record on Bhopal is its proposal to use \$150 million of the original compensation payment. They wanted to spend this on the richer nongas-affected areas of Bhopal, populated mainly by wealthy Hindus - presumably to gain votes for the ruling Hindu nationalist party, the BJP - at the expense of the poor and disenfranchised gas victims. If it were not for mass demonstrations by the victims last July, both of these proposals would, no doubt, have become reality.

Campaigners and volunteers continue to work tirelessly - 18 years after the disaster - to help the gas victims secure medical treatment and compensation. Yet for all the campaigning there is little sign of real action in the courts or, more importantly, on the ground.

by Luke David

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Footnote

1: In June 2010 Indian courts found seven Union Carbide employees including Chairman Warren Anderson guilty of negligence, a sentence that carried a maximum penalty of \$2,000 fine and two years in prison. Warren Anderson spent no time in prison, he died in 2014.