

International news

Toxic gas from a Union Carbide plant may have killed 20,000 people, with the toll still growing and the fight for compensation not yet over

Bhopal still suffering, 20 years on



Randeep Ramesh in Bhopal

Deepika Thani drew her first breath as the world's worst chemical accident flushed the air out of the lungs of thousands of people in Bhopal 20 years ago this week.

Just before midnight on December 2 1984, milky white clouds of toxic gas settled over the sleeping citizens of Bhopal. A lethal fog of poisonous gas was spewing from a pesticide plant owned by the American multinational Union Carbide.

Within hours, thousands died and tens of thousands lined hospital wards suffering from blindness, skin complaints and breathing difficulties. Born in a city of funerals, Deepika arrived after her mother had inhaled the deadly fumes that infiltrated homes during the night.

Approaching her 20th birthday, Deepika weighs just 33kg (73lb) and is a little more than 1.3 metres (4ft 6in) tall. Her periods, which started last year, are erratic and she suffers from dizzy spells. She is unable to concentrate for long and has yet to finish school.

Her family blames the "poison" for stunting her growth. "The gas has meant she has not developed normally," says her father, Kanhaiyalal Thani.

Deepika's story is not atypical in Bhopal, where at least half a million people were exposed to the toxic fumes and the legacy of the disaster claims more lives every day. Yet little appears to have been done to chart the gathering calamity. The Indian government stopped all research on the medical effects of the disaster a decade ago without explanation. More than 100,000 children of the victims have no medical cover.

There is a growing body of work to suggest that the ramifications might be far greater than first thought. Last year a

study by the American Medical Association found that boys who were either exposed as toddlers to gases from the Bhopal pesticide plant or born to exposed parents were prone to "growth retardation".

"We are only just beginning to see the results of what the gas did to the human body," says Satinath Sarangi of the Sambhavana Trust, which helps to rehabilitate victims. "What we have seen are shorter children with smaller heads. Unfortunately, there is very little official reaction to another generation's suffering."

According to the local administration, 3,000 people died on the night of the gas leak, but this is widely considered to be a gross underestimate. Hundreds of thousands fled Bhopal and no one knows how many did not return. Army trucks dumped unclaimed bodies in mass graves outside the city. Families vanished without a trace. Amnesty International believes the death toll was at least 7,000 and local doctors estimate it could be 15,000.

What is not in dispute is that the tragedy is still claiming new victims. Campaigners say the overall death toll exceeds 20,000, with a further half a million debilitated by chronic illness. The city's miscarriage rate is seven times the national average and its hospitals overflow with patients with respiratory illnesses and cancer.

"What you had was a gas that significantly reduced the body's immune system and laid it open to disease," says Shyam Agrawal, the director of the Navodaya oncology centre in Bhopal, who treated the sick and dying 20 years ago as a medical student. "Within India, Bhopal has one of the highest lung cancer rates in men, while women show very high rates of breast and cervical cancer. The cancer rates are significantly higher in gas-affected populations."

Despite this many survivors await adequate compensation. They say doctors' bills have long consumed small handouts meant to alleviate a lifetime's suffering.

Sitting outside her home in the rubbish-strewn alleys of Jai Prakash Nagar, 70-year-old Alia Bano recounts the night she lost 10 family members. "I still cannot breathe and stand up properly. My eyesight has never come back. I lost everything that night. All the government gave was 25,000 rupees [about £310] but that was used up long ago on medicines. Tell me, how will I live now?"

When Union Carbide finally left the city in 1999, it left behind thousands of tonnes of chemicals, toxins that have sunk into the soil and leached into the water supply.



Deepika Thani, 20, who was born on the day of the tragedy and believes it stunted her growth, with her younger brother Prakash, 19, and parents Renu and Kanhaiyalal. Below: Alia Bano, 70, who lost 10 members of her family and her eyesight

Photographs: Pablo Bartholomew/Netphotograph.com

Storage tank 610 sits near the rusting skeleton of the main complex. It was from here that the plume of methyl isocyanate, or MIC, shot into the sky. Four key safety measures failed that night, including the plant's cooling system and its flare tower, which could have burned off the gas.

When MIC is inhaled it produces an extremely acidic reaction, which attacks the internal organs, especially the lungs. This stops oxygen entering the blood, and victims drown in their own body fluids.

Union Carbide had been slowly running the plant down as the expected profits from its pesticide Sevin failed to materialise. The company maintains the disaster was due to sabotage.

Today, children play cricket and cows graze amid the rusting pipes, mounds of bagged waste and inky black pools of sulphurous smelling liquid. Tests of the water in nearby slums have found levels of contamination 500 times higher than the maximum recommended by the World Health Organisation. Greenpeace says decommissioning the plant would cost \$30m (£15m).

There are no signs of decontamination work. Although India's supreme court ruled in May that clean water must be provided to nearby residents, a quick trip around the wooden shacks reveals women carrying buckets of oily black water home to wash with and drink.

Astonishingly, no one has been held to account for the disaster. Many in Bhopal say they are still fighting for justice.

The Indian government is still pursuing Warren Anderson, the former chief executive of Union Carbide, who keeps a low profile in retirement on Long Island and in Florida. He was briefly detained by Indian police in 1984 before being released on bail, and has never returned to the subcontinent. In Bhopal, many walls carry the words "Hang Anderson".

Makan Lal Vishwakarma, who still suffers from headaches, says: "I can remember the dead on the roads, the smell of chillis burning my breath, people choking on their own vomit. I will never forget that night. Neither should Union Carbide or Mr Anderson."

Union Carbide says the matter is closed, and it "worked diligently to provide aid to the victims and set up a process to resolve their claims". The company, now part of the world's biggest chemical firm, Dow Chemicals, says it bears no liability for the site as it has since sold up and left India.

Union Carbide used the money to build a hospital in Bhopal and paid a lump sum of \$470m in an out-of-court settlement with the Indian government in 1989. This saw 99% of victims receive about £300 in compensation more than decade ago. They should receive the same again in the coming months.

The legal fight, say campaigners, is not over. This week a Bhopal court will hear whether Dow, with yearly sales of \$32.6bn, can be held responsible for the Bhopal plant. If the judge rules against the company, Dow's Indian assets could be seized.

"In New York after 9/11 there was compensation, punishment and clean-up in a just a few months," says Abdul Jabbar, who runs the Bhopal Women Gas Victims' Industrial Association. "In Bhopal, after 20 years, we have nothing."

Links

www.bhopal.org/jama.pdf
Bhopal medical appeal:
American Medical Association findings
bhopal.com Union Carbide's
Bhopal information site
guardian.co.uk/india

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- the release of all Palestinian political prisoners

While George Bush and Tony Blair say they will support a democratic Palestinian state, the "democratic" Israeli government is trampling on Palestinian democratic rights. Palestinians are attempting to organise elections despite an illegal military occupation imprisoning them in their towns and villages and behind the apartheid Wall. Israel is currently closing voter registration centres in occupied East Jerusalem and arresting Palestinians attempting to register.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign believes the Palestinians must be able to conduct their own elections free from outside interference and violence. We are calling for UN observers to study Israel's compliance with this.

We call on the British government to impose sanctions on Israel so long as it refuses to implement international law and continues its illegal occupation.

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