

25 years after world's worst industrial disaster, Bhopal victims languish in neglect

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Twenty-five years after the worst industrial accident in history, hundreds of thousands of long-suffering victims in Bhopal, the capital of the central state of Madhya Pradesh, continue to be treated with neglect and even contempt by every faction of the Indian establishment.

Just after midnight December 3, 1984, more than 40 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas and other unknown poisons, used in the manufacture of pesticide, were released from a chemical plant owned by the US multinational Union Carbide. Turning the area surrounding the facility and its nearby environs into a virtual gas chamber, the incident claimed an immediate 8,000 fatalities; some 170,000 residents were treated in hospital and temporary dispensaries.

The total number of deaths from the accident is presently estimated to be between 16,000 and 30,000. One of the reasons for the wide range of estimates is the number of immigrant workers, without family members to look for or claim them, who were likely killed.

To date not a single executive of Union Carbide, or its current owner Dow Chemical Company, has been brought to book for this act of mass murder that continues to claim victims.

The health impact for masses of people remains severe.

Dominique Lapierre and Javier Moro, in *Five past Midnight in Bhopal* (2002), wrote, "More than half a million Bhopalis suffered from the effects of the toxic cloud, in other words, three in every four inhabitants of the city. After the eyes and lungs, the organs most affected were the brain, muscles, bone joints, liver, kidneys, reproductive as well as the nervous and immune systems."

"Today," Lapierre and Moro write, more than 15 years after the event, "Bhopal has 150,000 people chronically affected by the tragedy, which still kills ten to fifteen patients a month. Breathing difficulties, persistent coughs, ulcerations of the cornea, early-age cataracts, anexoria, recurrent fevers, burning of the skin, weakness and depression are still manifesting themselves, not to mention constant outbreaks of cancer and tuberculosis.... Finally, retarded growth has been noted in young people between fourteen and eighteen, who look scarcely ten. Because Carbide never revealed the exact composition of the toxic cloud, to this day medical authorities have been unable to come up with an effective treatment."

Union Carbide refused to divulge the list of toxic chemicals that

were stored at the plant in order to limit its financial and criminal liability.

On the eve of the 25th anniversary, the Madhya Pradesh High Court rejected a petition the victims had filed demanding the reopening of the compensation settlement that the Indian government and the company negotiated in 1989. The government unilaterally imposed this insulting settlement without consulting any of the victims.

This settlement amounted to a meager sum of \$470 million dollars and received the blessing of the Indian Supreme Court. This was a steep climb-down from the \$3 billion, itself an inadequate figure, demanded by the Indian government in a 1985 lawsuit. The final compensation deal amounted to less than 16 percent of the original demand, revealing that the government was eager to bury this disaster and its consequences so as not to jeopardize its reputation as a reliable partner of international capital.

In exchange for this paltry sum, the government agreed to drop all pending civil and criminal charges against the company. This also practically shut the door to any further claims from the victims, leaving these hundreds of thousands of victims, many of whom had lost their marginal livelihoods, holding the bag.

In 2004 the Bhopal victims approached the Indian Supreme Court petitioning for the reopening of this settlement reached behind their backs. The Supreme Court, after three years, issued a ruling directing the victims to approach the Madhya Pradesh state government. When they approached the state government, it bluntly rejected their claim, which then prompted the victims to approach the State High Court which, in turn, also rebuffed their appeal.

During its initial negotiations on a settlement with Union Carbide, the Indian government placed the number of living victims at just 105,000. How the government arrived at this number remains a mystery as it had not even bothered to carry out a survey to gauge the extent of the disaster's impact. After protests and independent investigations by NGOS, the central government was forced to concede that the real number of victims was five times higher.

Out of the settlement amount, which in 1989 translated into just over 7 billion Indian rupees, the Indian government distributed a little over a billion rupees to persons whose property and livestock

had been damaged or destroyed. The remaining Rs. 6 billion were distributed to about 570,000 victims, including the family members of those who had died. Thus the compensation paid victims averaged the pitiful sum of 12,000 rupees, or about \$500 US.

The despair and suffering of victims has remained unabated. Neither the Indian nor the state government displays any concern toward the hundreds of thousands of victims whose lives have become an unending nightmare. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the so-called medical care amounted to empty assurances and advice to the victims to “wash their eyes with water.”

The failure to mount any meaningful medical response is a sign of the inadequacy of every aspect of medical care in India, including the lack of proper training, dilapidated facilities, and, ultimately, the officialdom’s lack of any concern for the wellbeing of India’s hundreds of millions of poor.

While giving next to no relief to the victims, the Indian government has undertaken the biggest military buildup in the past decade and handed out generous tax and other benefits to domestic and international corporations.

During the plant’s operation, Indian and state governments allowed Union Carbide to routinely dump toxic wastes and other effluents in nearby areas. Even today the storage tanks at the abandoned plant-site are full of toxic chemicals such as pesticides, solvents and other modern chemicals. These products contain numerous poisonous substances, including aldicarb, carbaryl, and mercury.

Time has taken a toll on all of the piping and other equipment in the abandoned Union Carbide plant, creating an ongoing deadly hazard to the people of Bhopal. The monsoon rains over the past quarter of a century have spread these poisonous chemicals for miles around, severely contaminating drinking water and the environment.

According to a 2002 study, several deadly toxins now have found their way into mother’s milk, thus posing a deadly hazard to new generations. Cancers, birth defects, and menstrual disorders have skyrocketed with many young children seriously stunted for the duration of their shortened lives.

There has been no shortage of reports with banner headlines in the mainstream media exposing the terrible situation of the Bhopal accident victims. However, none of the reports point out that all the leading institutions in India—the national government, the parliament, the state government, and the courts—are themselves criminally culpable for this social catastrophe.

On the eve of the 25th anniversary, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hypocritically made the following comments that were respectfully transmitted by the corporate media.

“The families that suffered and lost their dear ones can never really be fully compensated. We owe it to our fellow citizens to put in place procedures and precautions to ensure that such a tragedy never occurs again.” Singh claimed that the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government that has been in power since 2004 is “determined” to resolve all of outstanding issues related to the tragedy.

These words deserve contempt as this government has taken no action to alleviate the suffering of the victims.

Manmohan Singh makes a virtue out of the same free-market ideology directly responsible for this disaster. India’s environmental laws reflect the backward outlook of a corrupt ruling elite that considers popular wellbeing and the health of the natural environment as entirely subordinate to the profit-making interests of corporations.

In the guise of encouraging reuse and recycling, for example, the Indian government openly sanctions the import of all sorts of electronic waste into the country that is dumped in unsightly mountains. Many of the desperately poor then wade knee-deep among these toxic hills scouring for scraps they can sell for a pittance. The UPA government continues to sanction this practice, despite being well aware that such imports contravene the Basel Convention on the international movement of hazardous wastes and their disposal, and even India’s own domestic laws.

In 2007 the Greenpeace organization held a demonstration in New Delhi in front of the commerce ministry to highlight the dangers of the illegal import of hazardous e-wastes into the country. The UPA government reacted swiftly by arresting the peaceful demonstrators.

India is also home to many shipyards that dismantle retired battleships and other vessels containing large amounts of hazardous material. The workers at these shipyards are regularly exposed to toxins ruinous to human health.

However, nothing more clearly demonstrates the UPA government’s contempt for the population’s health than the political energy it is currently expending to enact a nuclear liability law. This law would limit the liability of US corporations supplying nuclear materials and building and operating civilian nuclear plants to a maximum of \$450 million dollars, regardless of the size and impact of a given accident.

This became one of Washington’s key demands following the signing of the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord in 2008. The American government, acting as the agent for corporations such as Bechtel and General Electric, has been insisting that India enact such a law before it will be allowed to import nuclear equipment from the US.

The victims of the Bhopal disaster will never receive justice from any bourgeois party or government in India, all of whom are dedicated to the profit interests of domestic and international corporations. A revolutionary reordering of society so that production is geared to fulfilling human needs rather than the profit interests of private corporations is a necessary first step to prevent the recurrence of such catastrophes.



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