

India: Over 80 killed in Madhya Pradesh explosion

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A massive blast that ripped through a three-storey building at Petlawad in Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua district last Saturday morning is estimated to have killed about 88 people and injured over 100.

The majority of victims were office workers and school children having breakfast in a packed restaurant inside the building. Scores of workers waiting at a nearby bus terminal were also hit with flying debris.

The blast is believed to have been caused by a stockpile of gelignite and other explosives stored in the building by mining and construction contractor Rajendra Kasawa. Jhabua district is the site of several manganese and bauxite mines.

Madhya Pradesh state police said that although Kasawa held a licence for explosives used for digging wells, construction and mining, these were illegally warehoused in the residential area. Kasawa is reported to have fled the town with his family after the incident.

Saturday's tragedy has brought to the surface the widespread practice of storing explosives in residential areas in order to cut costs and maximise profits. Kasawa, in fact, is reportedly one of a number of local contractors storing explosives in the Jhabua district. Government authorities in charge of regulating explosives storage have been accused of turning a blind eye to these health and safety violations.

The families of those killed in the explosion angrily heckled Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan when he visited the area on Sunday. They surrounded Chouhan, who heads the state's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government, demanding legal action against contractors violating the law and state officials implicated in the illegal practices.

In a desperate attempt to pacify angry relatives and neighbours, Chouhan ordered the dismissal of local

officials who allegedly knew about the explosives. He promised a judicial inquiry into the blast and declared that he would "bring those responsible to justice."

The BJP government has offered a reward for Kasawa's capture and the police raided his home, seizing explosives and detonators. On Monday, Chouhan announced that a Special Investigation Team would investigate the incident.

Chouhan's proclamations are entirely cynical. That Kasawa could freely operate his warehousing of explosives points to the possible political patronage that he enjoyed through his association with the BJP. Kasawa was part of a BJP-affiliated local traders association.

The opposition Congress party has seized on Kasawa's association with BJP for its own political advantage. It accused the BJP of being "soft" on Kasawa because of his political affiliations.

Congress's response to the tragedy is also hypocritical. Congress and the BJP are equally responsible for the horrendous conditions facing working people in Madhya Pradesh. While the BJP has ruled the state since December 2003, Congress held office during the previous ten years and also earlier, from June 1980 until March 1990.

Congress, moreover, ruled India for more than five decades following India's formal independence from British rule in 1947 and in 1991 initiated the free-market economic agenda.

Under Congress rule, Madhya Pradesh was the site of the world's largest industrial accident—the Bhopal disaster—in early December 1984. Between 16,000 and 30,000 people were killed and over half a million affected when 40 tonnes of deadly methyl isocyanate gas and other unknown poisons leaked from a plant owned by the US multinational Union Carbide in

Bhopal, the state capital.

The Bhopal disaster and the government's subsequent treatment of the victims demonstrate the utter contempt of India's ruling elite toward the lives of working people and rural poor, and its total commitment to the profit interests of local and foreign investors.

In June 2010, almost 25 years after the incident, the District Court of Bhopal found eight Union Carbide executives guilty of criminal negligence, subjecting each to just two years' jail and 100,000-rupee (\$US1,500) penalties. The company was fined just 500,000 rupees. Warren Anderson, the US CEO of Union Carbide, was not tried. Although he was arrested when he visited Bhopal after the disaster, he was released on bail and allowed to flee the country.

Notwithstanding the political posturing by the BJP and Congress over Saturday's disaster, the lack of basic health and safety will worsen as the Madhya Pradesh government and other Indian administrations, attempt to attract local and foreign investors.

As one state government official declared early this month, Madhya Pradesh will use an "Ease of Doing Business" study from the Asia Competitiveness Institute of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy to match investment policies with East Asian countries. Chief Minister Chouhan is to lead a business delegation to South Korea and Japan in early October to promote investment.

In line with the "investment-friendly" measures being implemented by the BJP-led central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the conditions are being created for more industrial disasters like last Saturday's explosion in Petlawad.



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