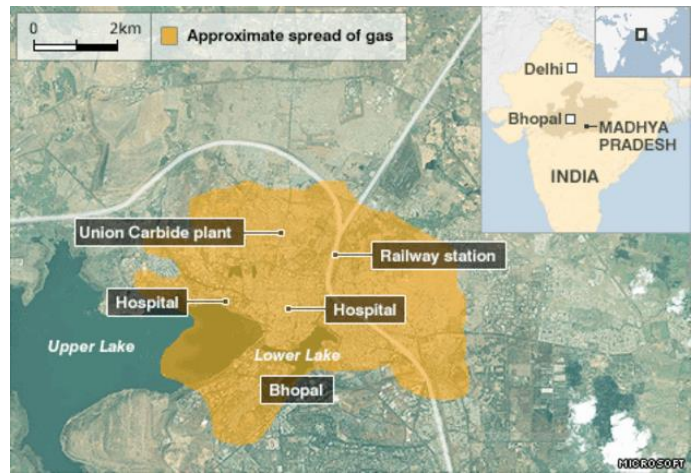


BHOPAL DISASTER

December 3, 1999 marks the 15th anniversary of the gas disaster in Bhopal, India. In the middle of the night on December 3, 1984, over 40 tons of Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) and other lethal gasses leaked from the American corporation Union Carbide's pesticide factory in the northern end of the city. It was a massacre. According to the Bhopal Peoples Health and Documentation Clinic (BPHDC), 8,000 people were killed in its immediate aftermath and over 500,000 people suffered from injuries. While most evidence points to corporate negligence, Union Carbide continues to blame a "disgruntled employee" for the accident.

Many of the people who survived the terrible night died slow and painful deaths in the years following the disaster. In fact, official figures show that more people have died in the subsequent years than in the immediate aftermath. According to a survivor's organization, Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udhog Sangathan (BGPMS), 10 to 15 people die every month from exposure related complications. The current death toll is well over 16,000 and there appears no end to the physical and mental suffering caused by exposure to the poisonous gases.



After 15 years, justice still evades the victims of Union Carbide's negligence in Bhopal. Bhopal victims' continuing search for justice is a reminder that the odds are stacked against the poor, against the victims, in favor of the rich, powerful corporations.

It is ironic yet fitting that the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle coincides with the 15th anniversary of Bhopal—ironic because on the one hand, the corporate drive towards profits at the cost of worker and community health and safety led to the disaster at Bhopal. The WTO, for its part, promotes an economic model that may well lead to more Bhopals. It is a model designed and run by corporate interests which is eroding protection, given to human rights, labor and the environment protections which could help prevent further Bhopals.

Meanwhile, the convergence of the Bhopal anniversary and the WTO Ministerial Summit is fitting for two key reasons. First, Bhopal serves as a ghastly reminder with what can go wrong if corporations continue to have their way in the global arena, as the WTO allows them to do. Second, the ongoing international grassroots response to Bhopal finds itself in a larger context part of a global grassroots movement to rein in corporate power and reverse the course of the unaccountable and anti-democratic WTO.

Timeline:

Midnight 2-3 December, 1984. Over 40 tons of highly poisonous methyl isocyanate gas leaked out of the pesticide factory of Union Carbide in Bhopal. Thousands died in the immediate aftermath. At least 10,000 have died in the years that have passed, and 10 more are dying every month due to exposure-related diseases. The hundreds of thousands who survived, however, face a fate worse than death. They suffer from acute breathlessness, brain damage, menstrual chaos, loss of immunity; some journalists have dubbed it chemical AIDS. But far from receiving sympathy or assistance from those responsible, the survivors are being treated as though they are criminals.

Twelve years later, the Corporation continues to victimize them by withholding information about the gas and possible courses of treatment. And the Government still fails to provide basic medical care and health services.

In February 1989, the Government sold out the people it claimed to represent, by agreeing to a settlement of just US\$ 470 million with the Corporation. Despite concrete evidence that the tragedy occurred due to unsafe design and reckless cost-cutting, it has lacked the will to take any action against the Corporation. It continues to ignore the repeated directives of the Bhopal court to extradite Warren Anderson and other senior officials of Union Carbide who face charges of manslaughter and other criminal offences.

In addition, the Government has not set up any effective mechanism to ensure that compensation reaches the survivors before it is too late. It has done next to nothing to rehabilitate them with hygienic living conditions and appropriate livelihood options.

Instead, the Government has had survivors beaten up, arrested and even jailed for demanding justice in Bhopal.

But the survivors are not giving up. They believe that the judgment of the last 12 years is not the final judgment on Bhopal. They are determined to continue their fight for justice. They hope for a safer world - a world with No More Bhopals.

In 1969, as part of its global empire, Union Carbide Corporation set up its pesticide formulation unit in the northern end of the city of Bhopal in central India. Initially it mixed and packaged pesticides imported from the US, but was gradually expanded. In December 1979 its Methyl IsoCyanate (MC) plant with an installed capacity of 5000 tons went into production.

On the night of December 2, 1984, during routine maintenance operations in the Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) plant, at about 9.30 p.m., a large quantity of water entered storage tank no. 610 containing over 60 tons of MIC.

This triggered off a runaway reaction resulting in a tremendous increase of temperature and pressure in the tank and 40 tons of MIC along with Hydrogen Cyanide and other reaction products burst past the ruptured disc and into the night air of Bhopal at around 12.30 a.m. Safety systems were grossly under-designed and inoperative. Senior factory officials knew of the lethal build-up in the tank at least one hour before the leakage, yet the siren to warn neighborhood communities was sounded more than one hour after the leak started. By then, the poisons had enveloped an area of 40 sq.kms, killing thousands of people in its immediate wake. Over 500 thousand suffered from acute breathlessness, pain in the eyes and vomiting as they ran in panic to get away from the poison clouds that hung close to the ground for more than four hours.

Health Impact- Government findings

Similar to death figures, most of the information on the immediate and long term health effects of gas exposure had been collected by government agencies, chiefly, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) which initiated twenty five research projects in early '85 to study the effect of the toxic gases on different body systems. In line with the Indian government's unwritten policy on Bhopal, these studies are biased towards underestimating exposure-related damages. Their findings and observations are however, indicative of the physical miseries caused to the people of Bhopal by Union Carbide. According to ICMR, the total estimated exposed population in 1984 was 521 262

Some of the findings of ICMR on the health status of persons who have directly or indirectly suffered exposure are as follows:

The toxins from Carbide's factory have crossed into the blood stream through the lungs, and have caused damage to the lungs, brain, kidneys and muscles, as well as gastro-intestinal, reproductive and immune systems of those who the poisonous gases.

Of the patients treated at one government hospital immediately after the disaster, 98.9% suffered from breathlessness, 85.8% had eye problems, 91 % had gastro-intestinal problems and in varying degrees there were at least 16 other complications. At least 10 of these "symptoms" persisted among the survivors till as late as 1992 (when the last ICMR report was published) with the addition of menstrual irregularities, spontaneous abortions, numbness in the limbs and mental health problems. Current unofficial estimates suggest that at least 120 000, survivors acutely suffer from one or more of these problems.

By December '85, serious disturbances in immune parameters of the exposed people as well as chromosomal aberrations in an abnormally large percentage of the population were noticed. Fibrosis of the lungs was reported as well as neurotic depression, anxiety and psychosis in 22.6% of exposed people.

Studies from '87 to'89 show that gas exposed children (up to age 5 years at the time of the disaster) suffered two to four times more from fever, breathlessness, vomiting, cough and other sicknesses, compared to children among similar unexposed populations.

As late as 1990, spontaneous abortion rates among gas exposed women were more than three times that among unexposed women. Mental and physical growth retardation has been documented among children born to gas exposed women years after the disaster. Six monthly morbidity surveys from '87 to '91 show that the number of people with exposure related symptoms is actually increasing. There were 3 times more people with respiratory symptoms in 1991 as compared to 1987.

Medical Care

The medical care of the survivors in Bhopal today remains essential the same as on the morning of the disaster. Doctors still do not fully know the effects of Carbide's chemicals on human beings or the means to ameliorate these effects. They still prescribe symptomatic drugs that provide temporary relief and the hospitals are still heavily crowded with patients (current average attendance at the four government hospitals is 4 000 per day). Lack of medical information on the leaked chemicals is a major impediment in the medical care of survivors. Whatever little medical information Union Carbide has give is either misleading or of doubtful value. Repeated requests for relevant medical information made to UCC by survivors' organizations have been unresponsive. In the absence of information, doctors in Bhopal continue to indiscriminately prescribe antibiotics, steroids and psychotropic drugs. A study carried out in June '90 by a team of volunteer doctors has shown that the incidence of hazardous and unnecessary medication in government hospitals is as high as 36.7%.

Assignment: Read the article and highlight the important information. Feel free to annotate ☺ Then in a detailed summary, discuss these issues (obviously use complete sentences).

1. What happened in the disaster?
2. What are two (2) harmful environmental and two (2) societal effects caused by this disaster?
3. How is the WTO involved? Identify what the WTO is.
4. What did Union Carbide do after this disaster? Describe each type of relief
5. Were the people of India satisfied with the disaster relief? Explain.
6. What is the importance of this environmental tragedy?
7. Opinion: DO you think this disaster could happen again? Why/not? Do you think the outcome would be the same?