

# BHOPAL The appalling legacy: [FINAL Edition]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Union Carbide, a diversified multinational corporation with assets of \$10.5 billion and factories, sales offices and research centres in 37 countries, is a company bedevilled by Bhopal, where its ill-fated pesticide plant never turned a profit. The calamity engendered billions of dollars in damage claims brought against the corporation by the Indian central government and American lawyers representing Bhopal victims.

Black & White Photo; Black & White Photo; Black & White Photo; Black & White Photo; Map; Alain Nogues, Sygma; illustration shows injured person Paula Bronstein, Hartford Courant; Floor is bed for this 4-year-old boy tended by his father in over-crowded hospital. Paula Bronstein, Hartford Courant; Woman training for job needing little exertion. Alain Nogues, Sygma; Heavily-populated slum areas suffered the most from plant's deadly cloud. Gazette; illustration shows location of Bhopal

## FULL TEXT

BHOPAL, India For the inhabitants of the gritty slum colonies of Bhopal, Tuesday was an anniversary of despair, the close of a bewildering period tainted by neglect and corruption.

It is a year since 40 tons of gaseous methyl isocyanate escaped from Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal and spread a choking death to 2,500 people in the shantytowns.

The unprecedented magnitude of the Bhopal disaster, its lessons and legacies, are still being argued and evaluated in courtrooms and in international forums, in the slums of Bhopal, and in the corporate headquarters of Union Carbide in Danbury, Conn.

Union Carbide, a diversified multinational corporation with assets of \$10.5 billion and factories, sales offices and research centres in 37 countries, is a company bedevilled by Bhopal, where its ill-fated pesticide plant never turned a profit. The calamity engendered billions of dollars in damage claims brought against the corporation by the Indian central government and American lawyers representing Bhopal victims.

135 in U.S. injured

The company's reputation for promoting industrial safety, besmirched at Bhopal, was further impugned by a gas leak that, without warning, engulfed Institute, W.Va., on a Sunday morning in August, injuring 135 people. For many

Americans, the episode dramatically evoked the toxic horror that swept faraway Bhopal.

Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh state in north-central India, an exceedingly polluted city of 800,000 people, recovered its frenetic, unfocused energy months ago.

The city lives as if calamity never struck within its limits.

Bhopal has raised no monuments to the events of Dec. 3, 1984. It bears no scars openly. It projects no reminders of the disaster.

The Union Carbide plant stands silent now, ramshackle and forlorn. The reckless growth of subtropical vegetation has begun to reclaim large sections of the installation's 65 acres.

Out beyond the plant gates, in a sweeping arc of tightly packed humanity, are the sprawling slums, the most impoverished quarters of an impoverished city. It is there, in such places as Jai Prakash Nagar, Kainchi Chhola, and Kazi Camp, where Bhopal's misery is most profound. Their inhabitants, the thousands of people who breathed the gas and survived, confront daunting, despairing futures.

"For those who have suffered, there has been no healing touch," said Hari Jaisingh, resident editor of the Bombay-based Indian Express, the country's largest daily newspaper.

Years to recover

"It will take years, generations, maybe, for the city to recover," said Bhopal Mayor Deep Chand Yadav. "The effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are still being felt. The same could be true for Bhopal."

Among the elements of Bhopal's catalogue of misery are:

Profound despair. Bhopal's survivors often speak of a gnawing, deepening desperation about their conditions. Laborers, like pushcart operators, who rely on stamina and physical strength for their livelihoods, complain that their capacity for prolonged menial labor has been vastly diminished by exposure to methyl isocyanate.

Among many survivors, including mothers of young children, a strain of fatalism prevails. Many say their lives have become so grim and painful that it would have been better if they had died in the gas cloud.

Dire prognoses. Severely injured survivors are given little prospect by Indian medical authorities that their damaged bodies can ever be restored.

Many survivors walk from clinic to clinic in pursuit of readily dispensed medication, pills of all colors, the names and nature of which they seldom know. The drugs, they say, bring only fleeting comfort.

Corruption. The only sustained measure of general relief, the free rations of wheat and rice that the state and central governments have distributed to low-income families in Bhopal for nearly 12 months, has been beset by corruption. Through the widespread use of fraudulent or duplicate ration cards, from 5 percent to 25 percent of the foodstuffs have been diverted for resale on the black market.

For the injured, the principal victims of such abuses, "it's just tragedy after tragedy, tragedy after tragedy," said J.P.

Diwan, general secretary for the private Citizens' Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation.

Belated assistance. Only in the final weeks before the anniversary of the gas leak did the Madhya Pradesh government initiate a broad-based job-training and placement program for Bhopal's victims.

Meanwhile, suspicion and recrimination abound in Bhopal. Left-wing advocacy groups say the Madhya Pradesh government and Union Carbide are in league to deprive victims of compensation and relief, to suppress disclosure of the full extent of the gas leak's debilitating injuries, and to prepare for the pesticide plant's eventual reopening.

### Company blamed

State and local authorities let pass few opportunities to savage Union Carbide. They assert that the company failed to respond compassionately to the disaster and has sought to escape responsibility for the accident. Union Carbide's unequivocal assertions that the gas leak was the work of shadowy saboteurs draws vehement denunciation in India and has further darkened the company's reputation in a country where it has operated for 51 years.

"Union Carbide is the worst company in the world," said Dr. R.K. Bisarya, a practicing physician who was Bhopal's mayor at the time of the leak. He said Union Carbide did nothing to assuage the suffering in Bhopal.

Union Carbide officials in India and Danbury bristle at such statements, insisting that Indian authorities have inexplicably blocked their offers of assistance.

"Anytime our name is associated with trying to do anything to solve some of the problems, (we) get turned off," Warren M. Anderson, chairman of Union Carbide, said in an interview as the anniversary of the disaster approached. "When you try to do good things, it gets misunderstood."

Among the inhabitants of Bhopal's slums, it is commonly believed that poisonous compounds are still kept, or surreptitiously produced, inside the pesticide plant. Seldom are the consequences discussed in India's freewheeling press. Rare are the articles that scrutinize the faltering official responses.

"The Bhopal tragedy has come and gone and did not create the kind of impact on the Indian subcontinent as it should have," said Bisarya, the former mayor. He suggested that the accident's diminished prominence in India is explained by the absence of immediate reminders that testify to its destructiveness. After all, the former mayor said, "everything seems to be normal here."

"This was like a chemical war. The buildings still stood but the people and animals were dead," Bisarya said.

The gas cloud took its greatest toll among the poor people of Bhopal, among the unskilled and the unevenly educated. Among the injured survivors, a profound sense of desperation prevails. Frustration and a sense of futility emerged repeatedly in interviews with the people who survived the gas leak. Few of them spoke English, and they discussed their plight through Hindi-speaking interpreters.

Among them was Zeenat, a 30-year-old mother of three children, one of whom suckled at her breast even as Zeenat's slight body was convulsed by a cough she could not stop. Her brown eyes, which seem to betray a deep weariness, burn almost constantly, she said, and daylong headaches are not uncommon.

Zeenat was a woman of the slums who had inhaled methyl isocyanate and who had all but resigned: "If we had died,

it would have been better. Now, we are all really suffering, from young to old."

That sense of fatalism found frequent, matter-of-fact expression.

"Sometimes, I don't feel like living," said Laxmi Bai, 25, mother of an 8-month-old daughter. The woman complained of fatigue brought about by chronic breathlessness and said, "We are completely depressed."

Diminished physical capacity is a frequent complaint, and a source of abiding frustration.

Ifetkar Ansari is an itinerant peddler who sells cheap plastic shoes from a crude pushcart that he guides through the broken streets of Jai Prakash Nagar. Ansari, a shrunk, wizened man who looks considerably older than his 38 years, lost two teen-age children to methyl isocyanate and says exposure to the gas left his lungs severely damaged.

Trouble breathing

"I have chest pains and trouble breathing," Ansari said. "I can't work as hard as I did before the leak. That strength is gone. I have tried to get it back. I hope I will recover, but it will take a long time."

Ansari said he is convinced that no effective treatment exists for his deteriorated condition. Leading physicians in Bhopal offer little optimism.

"We do not know of any specific treatment for MIC-induced lung disease," said Dr. N.P. Mishra, head of the department of medicine at Gandhi Medical College in Bhopal and the local coordinator of the 15 studies being conducted by the Indian Council on Medical Research into the disaster's aftermath. "There are limitations in the treatment," he said. "We cannot produce the same lungs as before the accident."

Easily the most open secret in Bhopal is the corruption that has riddled the state government's program of distributing free wheat and rice to the city's poor populations.

By February, within two months of the start of the rations program, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, which conducted surveys of 25,000 households in Bhopal, determined that rations were supposedly being distributed to 1.2 million people. The city's estimated population is 800,000 people; its population of poor people is 500,000.

The survey found that some people carried as many as five ration cards, said the project's coordinator, V.G. Panwalkar.

Joshi, the Madhya Pradesh government spokesman, acknowledged corruption in the rations program, saying: "There must have been a lot of abuses, no doubt about it. There were phantom cards."

He said government authorities took no steps to prosecute suspected violators because a crackdown would disrupt the relief program and aggravate the city's distress.

"People who are genuinely needy would also suffer," Joshi said.

Joshi also acknowledged, "There's no doubt that the (government's) rehabilitation program started late. But in any case, better late than never."

## Training 40,000

The government envisions training up to 40,000 people, most of them from the hardest-hit shantytowns, in occupations that demand little physical exertion but offer the eventual prospect of steady income. The first production and training centres were opened this fall; 80 are supposed to be operating by early next year, said V.N. Kaul, the state government's secretary for commerce and industry.

Job training will include sewing-machine operating, mat-making, loomweaving, bookbinding, envelope-folding, and chalk-making, he said.

The object, Kaul said, is to give the victims a chance at developing skills they may be able to use at home, as a sort of modest cottage industry.

Complaints from participants were not long in coming.

Women assigned for training in the tedious tasks of folding and pasting envelopes complained during the project's first days that they preferred sewing-machine instruction, which holds greater prospect for gainful self-employment.

Some trainees were grateful. Nasarat Jan, 18, whose parents and three sisters were killed by the gas, secured a position as a seamstress trainee.

She grew tired from constantly pumping the sewing machine's foot pedal, she said, and still has severe chest pains. But Jan said she had no skills, and only two years of schooling because her father wanted her at home for household chores.

There are, however, gas victims too infirm ever to expect to enroll in a job-training program.

Abida Sultan, a large woman with broad, fleshy features, is one of them.

She is 26 and said she had spent most of the past year in hospitals being treated for the chest pains, gastric ailments and recurring headaches that she has had since she inhaled methyl isocyanate.

She spoke sitting upright in her bed at the crowded ward for methyl isocyanate victims at Hamidia Hospital, Bhopal's largest, a grim place where birds enter through unscreened windows and small mice dart between the patients' beds.

"If I ever get any kind of work like that," Sultan said, "I'll do whatever is the lightest possible."

With that, Sultan fell back heavily onto her thin mattress, fatigued and breathless, her husband said, from the few minutes spent in conversation.

## Illustration

Black & White Photo; Black & White Photo; Black & White Photo; Black & White Photo; Map; Caption: Alain Nogues, Sygma; illustration shows injured person Paula Bronstein, Hartford Courant; Floor is bed for this 4-year-old boy tended by his father in over-crowded hospital. Paula Bronstein, Hartford Courant; Woman training for job needing little exertion. Alain Nogues, Sygma; Heavily-populated slum areas suffered the most from plant's deadly cloud. Gazette; illustration shows location of Bhopal

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