Anatomy of a crime against humanity

REPORT BY **INDRA SINHA** *www.indrasinha.com*

AT THE FOOT of this page is a picture of a child being buried the morning after a leak at Union Carbide's factory in the Indian city of Bhopal killed thousands in one night of horror. The photographer cried as he took the picture.

If you don't know the story of that night, it is of people woken from sleep with a gas 500 times more deadly than cyanide in their mouths and eyes, of people choking, blinded by an invisible fire that burned and tore at the lungs until it drowned them in their own body fluids.

On that hateful dawn, as heaps of bodies lay in the streets twisted in their death agonies, who could have guessed that 22 years later we would still be burying babies in this city?

Today in Bhopal, 120,000 people are chronically sick, ten people each month die from injuries caused by the gases of 1984. But the story grows wickeder.

People who were never exposed to Carbide's gases are falling ill with symptoms similar to those of the victims of 1984. In some areas near the factory, there is a 98% rate of anaemia among women. Children are being born without fingers, lips and noses. The cause is lethal chemicals in their drinking water, poisons leaking from the now-derelict factory that Union Carbide never bothered to clean up.

The death factory was not a single large building, but a collection of chemical plants, offices and warehouses spread over a 66 acre site. It was always a flawed project. In the most dangerous units Carbide's US managers cut costs by using technology their own report describes as unproven and fraught with difficulties.

The risk, they decided, was 'acceptable'.

The waste from the factory, thousands of tons of deliriously toxic sludges, was dumped in vast open-air lakes lined with plastic flimsier than a dustbin bag. Come the first rains, they leaked, spreading poisons across fields and into drinking water. Cattle died, people became sick. Frantic telexes from Bhopal about the leaking ponds were ignored by bosses far away in America.

By 1984, with the factory making massive losses, Carbide went on a major economy drive. 335 jobs were culled. The maintenance staff was halved, safety training was cut from six months to two weeks.

MIC, methyl isocyanate, the gas that leaked, is so volatile that Carbide's own safety regulations required its storage tank – the size of a locomotive – to be kept at 0°C, but refrigeration was turned off to save freon gas worth $37.68 a day. Half the plant operators in the fatal MIC unit were sacked.

Urgent warnings from the workforce and growing public disquiet, including four separate articles by journalist Rajkumar Keswani predicting an impending catastrophe, were all ignored, as were the alarming findings of a 1982 safety audit by Union Carbide engineers from the US. The cost-cutting continued. Old parts were re-used to save money on repairs. A leaky valve and a worn washer led directly to the disaster.

When disaster struck, not one of the factory's safety systems was working. The vent scrubber lay in pieces, dismantled for repairs that were never to be completed. The flare tower was turned off. The fire hoses were too feeble to reach the escaping gases. The public alarm siren did not sound. Union Carbide Corporation in the US, which as 50.9% majority shareholder had managed the factory and supervised the cost-cutting, first blamed its Indian managers, then an imaginary terrorist group and finally asserted that the plant had been sabotaged by 'a disgruntled employee' – a claim it repeats to this day.

The human consequences of these actions are appalling. Half the women pregnant on 'that night' had miscarriages. The months that followed saw a spate of 'horrific births', which continue to this day.

But if the original disaster can be called an accident, what followed cannot, for Union Carbide abandoned its factory leaving behind thousands more tons of poisons like lindane and carbaryl in gunny bags and rusting drums. Mercury drops still lie on the soil where they fell more than two decades ago.

While the factory grounds returned to jungle, 22 monsoons washed the poisons ever deeper into the subsoil and into the drinking wells of people like the family of Shahida Bee.

'My daughter-in-law had a son on 15 March (2006). The baby was perfectly formed, with a beautiful face, except the rest of the head was missing,' says Shahida, who was in Delhi recently with survivors who had walked 500 miles to ask the Prime Minister for help.

Like some 26,000 other people, Shahida's family have for years been washing in and drinking poisoned water.

Carbide's private documents reveal that the company knew of the danger as early as 1989, but kept denying that there was a problem. It watched silently while local people, many of whom were already victims of the gas, were poisoned a second time. It did not even clean up the chemicals. Union Carbide, today wholly owned by Dow Chemical of napalm and agent orange fame, still refuses to clean its factory. Since 1992 it has also been refusing to appear in an Indian court where it faces criminal charges of culpable homicide. It has been declared an absconder from justice in India. Dow could easily afford to clean the factory. It's ready to pay $2.2 billion to settle Carbide's US asbestos liabilities, but says it is not responsible for Carbide's Indian liabilities.

The diseases and illnesses suffered by the Bhopalis are beyond description.

This figure illustrates a few, but cannot show the agony of the girl who endures three periods a month, with pain that causes her 'to flip about like a fish out of water'. It cannot start to express the terror of mothers who know their babies are suckling poisoned breast milk, nor the grief of the young woman who told us, 'Babies born with a missing palate can not breast feed. They try, but all the milk runs outof their noses.'

In 1996, we opened a free clinic in Bhopal to give care to survivors of the gas disaster and those suffering from water poisoning. Our combination of modern medicine, herbal treatments, yoga postures, breathing and massage has so far eased the suffering of more than 20,000 people.

All consultations, treatments and medicines are free. The clinic relies solely on donations from individuals. Now that you know this awful story, we beg you, please dig deep to help us carry on our work. As Shahida says, 'In this world there's no justice, but there are good people. That alone keeps us alive.'

'Human figure' by Prakriti

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I cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of the innocent victims of Bhopal which has been going on 22 years too long

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