

Indians still haunted by worst industrial accident

BHOPAL, India Hazra Bi wishes she could forget. But her damaged family is a living reminder of that December night 25 years ago when lethal gas leaked from a pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, in the worst industrial disaster the world has ever seen.

The gas that swept through her poor neighborhood left her nearly blind in one eye, menopausal at 36, with searing headaches and breathlessness. It left her son, then 4, unable to control his bladder and suffering debilitating panic attacks. And two years ago it gave her a granddaughter born severely underweight, her legs like twigs, who still cannot walk or talk.

The Bhopal industrial disaster killed about 4,000 people in the early hours of Dec. 3, 1984. A few days later the death toll had doubled. Over the next few years, the lingering affects of the poison nearly doubled the toll again, to about 15,000, according to government estimates. Local activists say the real numbers are almost twice that.

A quarter-century later, thousands like Bi are still grappling with the affects of exposure to the deadly gas as it winds its way through generations not even born when the disaster struck. Rights groups say toxic waste from the plant still contaminates the soil and groundwater in nearby neighborhoods.

"We're still finding children as young as 2 months old being born with birth defects," says Satinath Sarangi, director of the Sambhavna Trust Clinic, which offers free health care for those exposed to gas or polluted water.

According to the government, at least 500,000 people were affected by the gas leak, and activists like Sarangi say that thousands of children, born to parents directly exposed to the gas leak or poisoned by the contaminated water, are suffering from cleft lips, missing palates, twisted limbs.

Government officials say there is no current contamination and dismiss assertions that the birth defects are related to the disaster. Babulal Gaur, the state minister for Gas Relief and Rehabilitation, says the diseases plaguing the children are only a consequence of living in poor slums.

American chemical company Union Carbide Corp. has said that the accident which took place when water entered the sealed tank containing the highly reactive MIC was an act of sabotage by a disgruntled employee, never identified, and not lax safety standards or faulty plant design, as claimed by some activists.

Union Carbide was bought by Dow Chemical Co. in 2001. Dow says the legal case was resolved in 1989, when Union Carbide settled with the Indian government for \$470 million, and that all responsibility for the factory now rests with the government of the state of Madhya Pradesh, of which Bhopal is the capital.

Tomm F. Sprick, a spokesman for Union Carbide gave The Associated Press a statement saying "the groundwater issue at the Bhopal site is best addressed by the state government of Madhya Pradesh, which owns the site and is responsible for clean up activities," and that the company gave the Indian government all the toxicity information about the chemicals involved in the manufacture of MIC.

It's a responsibility that the state government accepts.

"Dow Chemical does not own that site. We do," says Gaur, the minister.

Through the twisting, dirt-filled alleys of the slums that bore the brunt of the gas leak, it's impossible to walk past more than a dozen homes without finding at least one young child with visible physical abnormalities.

Dressed in a faded blue sweater and bright red pants, Hazra Bi's granddaughter, Taheba, drags herself across the floor as she plays with a piece of silver foil.

"A 2-year-old walks, talks, responds to its name, but this is the fate of the third generation of Bhopal," Hazra Bi says, as she watches over the child.

Elsewhere in the city, 26-year-old Rizwana Bi sits on a plastic mat minding her 8-year-old daughter Menaz, who looks half her age and whose twisted body is strapped into a special chair with a wooden back to support her spine.

Rizwana and her husband (who are unrelated to Hazra) both were exposed to the gas as children, and have two sons, both of whom have severe speech defects and poor mental development.

She is one of dozens of parents who bring their children to a special school and clinic run by the Chingari Trust, a nonprofit organization funded in large part by the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize awarded in 2004 to Bhopal activists and survivors Rashida Bee and her friend and neighbor, Champa Devi Shukla.

Chingari, which means "spark" in Hindi, says it has identified hundreds of children with disabilities ranging from cerebral palsy to speech defects who were born to parents exposed to the gas or the contaminated water.

Hundreds of tons of toxic material from the factory still sit in a warehouse on the premises, but Gaur says there is no contamination of either the soil or water.

The tragedy of Bhopal's children is compounded by the lack of any detailed research into the long term health implications of exposure to the gas.

In 1985 the Indian Council of Medical Research the top government-funded body conducting medical investigations initiated two dozen studies into the likely biomedical impact of MIC exposure. Most of those studies were never published, say doctors involved in the research.

"We were told that studies could not be published because of some legal issues, but to date those studies have not been published," said Dr. N.R. Bhandari, a pediatrician who was the main investigator in five studies.

According to V.M. Katoch, the New Delhi-based head of the medical council, most of the main findings of the investigations were published and "the individual studies will not merit a publication anyway."

The council is open to funding new studies in Bhopal, Katoch said, but added that in the last 10 months they have received only two project proposals.

For now, people like Hazra Bi remain caught between despair and hope.

"For us nothing changes. People come and write about us and then they go away. We stay here and our problems stay here," she said. "But we will go on fighting."

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