

25 Years On, Bhopal Tragedy Victims Still Crying for Justice

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BHOPAL, India, June 2010 (IPS) - Twenty-five years after an industrial gas leak from the factory of a U.S. multinational firm in this ancient Indian city killed thousands and impaired nearly half a million, victims are still crying for justice.

On Monday a court in Bhopal sentenced to two years each eight former top officials, one of them already deceased, of the Indian subsidiary of Union Carbide Corp (UCC), for the 1984 Bhopal gas leak that eventually killed about 20,000 and crippled generations. The convicted included the chairman of the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL), Keshub Mahindra, at the time of the accident.

"We demand hanging of the culprits," cried a female victim on the street of the capital of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh soon after the judgment. "Even now thousands of babies are born with deformities and you call it justice?"

The seven convicted who remain alive were given a two-year sentence and fined 100,000 Indian rupees (2,123 U.S. dollars) each. UCIL was imposed a fine of 500,000 rupees (10,615 dollars).

The convicted UCIL officials posted bail immediately after the judgment.

"The judgment is a mockery of the justice system in India. This is no justice. It is a message to the multinationals that they can come and pollute and kill and leave without any punishment," said Rachana Dhingra, an activist member of Bhopal Group for Information and Action, a social organisation fighting for rights of the survivors of the gas tragedy.

The verdict did not include the absconding former chairman of the UCC, Warren Anderson, believed to have gone into hiding in the United States after his brief arrest and subsequent bail in India many years ago.

Anderson was named as accused and charged with manslaughter. He was later declared an absconder in the case.

"The Prime Minister of India should now take a call and move the USA to extradite Warren Anderson," said Sadhna Pathak, a lawyer supporting the victims in their legal crusade.

"We will fight for justice till the end since this is no punishment," activist Rasheeda Bi, a victim herself, said. "It proves that the Indian justice system is flawed and weak. It proves that our governments, our prime ministers, no one did anything for the sufferers, and the

entire world watched it.”

On the fateful night of Dec. 2, 1984, residents of Bhopal became victims of the world’s worst industrial disaster when 40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate – a highly volatile toxic chemical stored at the pesticide plant owned by UCIL – was contaminated with water and other impurities.

As a result, a mixture of deadly gases escaped from the factory, killing several thousands of people and inflicting grievous injuries on at least 500,000 others.

At least 3,000 bodies were strewn all over Bhopal the following morning while an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 died eventually over the years from the harmful effects of the toxic fumes. Official figures, however, put the death toll at 15,000.

The survivors and their children suffer from long-term health effects ranging from tuberculosis, birth defects, chronic fever to cancer.

Latest tests by India’s Centre for Science and Environment show that groundwater in areas even three kilometres away from the factory site contains almost 40 times more pesticides than the allowable level in India.

The Dow Chemical Company, which bought the UCC in February 2001, or 17 years after the Bhopal tragedy, said it had no responsibility for the gas leak in a factory it did not operate.

The Bhopal tragedy trial that began in 1987 and had heard numerous arguments from the prosecution, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India’s federal investigating agency, and defence for the eight main accused, had dragged on for 23 years before Monday’s verdict.

In 1996, the Supreme Court, India’s apex court, reduced the charges against the Indian officials of the UCIL, partly on grounds that culpability lay with its U.S. parent company.

Four organisations of the survivors of the gas leak said the Indian government was responsible for the “criminal negligence” in the weak prosecution of those accused of responsibility for the disaster.

They also slammed the prosecuting agency for its “incompetence and mishandling of the case” as well as the Prime Minister, since he is in charge of the CBI, they said.

“Justice will be done in Bhopal only if the individuals and corporations responsible for the deaths of over 25,000 and toxic exposure and damage to over half a million people are punished in an exemplary manner,” said representatives of the four organisations.

“The judgment is a judicial disaster and will encourage hazardous corporations to kill more people and get away with anything,” said Satinath Sarangi, an activist in Bhopal fighting for the survivors.

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