

The Bhopal disaster (1984 – 2024): Reflections on the anniversary of a wound that does not heal

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Forty years have elapsed since that fateful 3 December 1984 in the city of Bhopal (India), where the tragedy triggered by the explosion of a container at the Union Carbide plant, devoted to the production of pesticides, would leave an indelible trace on the community. The leak from the containers provoked the release of methyl isocyanate (MIC), which was not only an irritant gas but also lethal. When the safety mechanisms failed, hazardous chemical

substances in the gaseous state were released, including at least 27 tonnes of MIC, a highly toxic compound used as precursor in the production of carbaryl insecticide. In this plant, 8,000 people were killed and 500,000 suffered from systemic damage.^{1,2} Fig. 1 shows the disaster area.

On this 40th anniversary, it is crucial to remember the devastating consequences of the exposure to toxic substances and the long-term impacts on human health



Figure 1. Union Carbide factory after the Bhopal accident (Credits: Nyča J).

and the environment. The MIC leak left a legacy of diseases, among them chronic respiratory diseases, eye injuries, immune system deficiencies, nerve and neuromuscular damage, and mental health problems persisting nowadays.⁴ Behind each statistic, there are histories of pain, struggle and resilience.

The extent of the tragedy was largely due to the lack of efficiency in the safety systems, as well as to the lack of organisation and the neglect evident in the emergency response protocols, despite the high level of toxicity of the compound involved.⁵ Although time can blur the memories, the tragedy is still a warning sign of the importance of industrial safety, responsibility and the protection of human rights. The Bhopal disaster epitomises the failure of governments to fulfil their responsibilities of preventing

environmental catastrophes, tackling their consequences and stopping continuous environmental pollution.

Bhopal is a grim reminder of the critical need of properly assessing chemical hazards, implementing strict safety measures and enforcing effective emergency protocols in every industrial facility. Likewise, it emphasises the importance of transparency, of a clear risk communication and of the community participation in the management of chemical disasters. It is our responsibility to honour their memory and to heighten public awareness on the risks of negligence and lack of regulation. May the legacy of Bhopal inspire us to fight for a future where tragedies like this one are unthinkable and where justice and compassion prevail over indifference and oblivion.

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