

## **Bhopal, India's open wound**

(1/3) December 3, 1984, the city of Bhopal, India, falls asleep. Suddenly, a toxic cloud spreads from the nearby pesticide factory of Union Carbide. Panic strikes the city. People cough and cry. The first night's figures: 3828 dead. Ever since, the victims felt abandoned.

BHOPAL, INDIA  
FROM OUR SPECIAL ENVOY

'The moment I left my home on the infamous night of December 2/3 1984, I had no idea where to go. But I did my duty. All I had was my wife and my two little children. I left them at home and I left. I couldn't do anything else.'

Swaraj Puri remembers the atrocious night which forever deformed Bhopal, the capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The man cries. Not out of grief, but out of pain. He produces a metal box from the pocket of his vest. It is full of various medicines. 'For the eyes and the lungs. This is the price I pay every day for trying to save lives that night.' The man, sitting in the middle of his office, arches his head back, as he did a million times and brings a small glass tube to the irises of his eyes to pour a few drops of the beneficial substance.

Swaraj Puri is 62 years old. He was born on the very day India regained its independence, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. He was the police chief in Bhopal when the gas leak from the Union Carbide factory has been confirmed, 25 years ago. He was one of the first people to get there. It was him who organised and coordinated all of the rescue operation.

'It was a cold winter night. I've just finished my paperwork and was getting ready to go to sleep', says the corpulent, moustached man between one fit of coughing and another. 'Suddenly, the control room of the factory called me. Something was going wrong in the tower. The man talking to me was saying something about a gas leak. Since Carbide was producing pesticides, we were aware that their products could be problematic, especially that there had been incidents before that. We were being careful. All the more so that the silo in question, the E610, was situated just next to petrol tanks.'

The police officer decided to call elsewhere first. The telephone was down. 'I went down to the office, gave a few instructions and decided to go there quickly.' When he arrived at the site, he was shocked. The race against death began. Swaraj Puri remembers: 'Everybody was running. It was universal panic. Everybody scrambled to the train station to catch the first train out of town possible. Which direction? No matter. In their run for life, they had their mouths wide open, like me. Now they're paying the price, like me. A few minutes after the catastrophe they were coughing already. Their eyes glistened.'

Around the gigantic factory, families were getting organised. They were packing – clothes, the most necessary items. They grabbed the essentials. They were fleeing.

'People were running around. Some fell to the ground never to get up again. Others trampled them, sometimes without even noticing', remembers even today the policeman. He thinks this panic was responsible for the very high death toll on the first night: 3828 victims.

Puri called for help: the managers of the factory, doctors, policemen and magistrates. It is 3 o'clock in the morning and it is time to act. At the time, nobody was aware of the size and the nature of the leak. Therefore, no one was able to estimate its future consequences.

'Around half past four in the morning, we came to a conclusion', says the policeman whose speciality is to deal with crisis situations. 'There were dead bodies almost everywhere. We didn't know their number. We didn't even know why they died. Suffocated or trampled to

death? We sent them to hospitals. It would have been perfect to conduct full post-mortem. They were so numerous, it seemed unbelievable to us.'

The reason for the accident was soon found out. For economic reasons the plant was working at half capacity. 'In the evening, two men were cleaning the pipelines', says Dr Sattynah Sarangi from the Shambavna Trust NGO, an association with close ties to Greenpeace. 'The pipelines were connected to the E610 silo containing 42 740 litres of MIC (methyl isocyanate), a very toxic and irritating substance. Water and MIC came into contact, which caused a runaway reaction. Pressure rose fivefold. The workers were used to various defects and were not worried much. Until their eyes started to itch and they themselves started to cough. Around 1 o'clock in the morning, the pressure was 25 times higher than normal. The alarm sounded. Too late. The only solution would be to drop a large amount of caustic soda in to the silo, but there was none in the factory. Savings with tragic consequences...'

Today, almost 25 years after the disaster, the life of Swaraj Puri has changed completely. It is not only the eyes and the lungs that were affected. The memories are still vivid. 'Each year, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, I make the same pilgrimage. I always visit the hospitals in the vicinity of the factory. I leave flowers in the place where several children were buried the day after the catastrophe.'

This desolation nestled in Swaraj Puri's heart since the fateful December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1984 is also reflected in the city of Bhopal itself.

At least 36 districts out of 56 were affected by the toxic cloud. It reached even the shantytowns which sprouted around the industrial wasteland created around the pesticide factory.

Khasi Camp is one of such shantytowns. The cloud affected it gravely, which is no surprise considering that it adjoined the plant back in 1984. Today, it is even closer, due to its expansion. Corrugated steel shacks and meanders of colourful planks constitute this settlement.

Bare-foot children dressed in rags run around with kites made of plastic bags. It is the only toy they can afford. Or rather, the only one they can build. Old people sit on old stumps. They are resting between one short walk and another. Their lungs cannot take much more – a vestige of the toxic cloud from 25 years ago.

Nusiddiqui likes to sit for a while, but not too often. Although his seventieth year approaches quickly, he likes to remain active. For his own sake and for his kin. Dressed white, he spends his days grinding cereals.

'Carbide, I know it', he says, almost proud. 'I worked there, I lived very close. When the accident happened, I was sleeping. Suddenly, I heard people crying in the street. I quickly understood what was going on, because the alarms sounded. The siren I heard that night, it was for MIC leak. I covered my nose immediately, like they told us to do in case of problems. Of course we knew this could happen. Then, I lost consciousness.'

Even though he still works to feed his large family, Nusiddiqui knows all too well that he was lucky. 'The government charged itself with treating my lungs and my liver. Moreover, as a compensation for my wife's and my own sickness, we got 200 000 rupees (being 3000 euros).'

One miserable pay for two destroyed lives. Still it is a real gold mine compared to thousands of victims left to their own fate. Most of them is not even able to work again. What is the origin of such a discrepancy?

'The slowness of the Indian administration seem to really disgust the victims', says Bobby Agrawal, representative of a small boutique taking active part in the association dedicated to helping the victims of the gas. There are people who simply do not know how to demand their reparation. 'We cannot deny a certain fatalism induced by the religion with a small percentage of the population. They live their lives as a sacrifice for a better future life. Then there are those, who receive the bare minimum. We like to tell ourselves that their level of existence was not much more than what it is now.' Most of these people got 25 000 rupees, being 400 euros.

In front of Nusiddiqui's place walks a man with a sprayer. This is how the city thumbs its nose to the people living here. The majority of the grounds contaminated with the MIC have never been decontaminated. Water is undrinkable in certain places. The man with the sprayer is only decontaminating the lower parts of the shantytown's 'façades'.

A few metres further, an old lady is sitting in front of a door. What or who is she waiting for? No one knows. She brushes the flies off her face with a gesture she repeats for a millionth time. Noorjehan says she is '60 to 70 years old'. 'I lived here in Khasi Camp when the gas leaked. My husband died after a few years because of respiratory problems. I have never received any reparation. Both my daughters were pregnant at the time of tragedy and they both lost their babies.'

Has Noorjehan ever asked for compensation? She evades the reply. What would she get anyway? The quotas defined by the government amount to 400 euros for a sick person and at most 1500 in case of death. Not enough to rebuild one's life. Open sewers emit a terrible stench of excrements. The dark alleys of Khasi Camp are a proof of the city's fate. Even among the youngest children, the words used the most frequently are 'gas victim'.

This is a sign that even though their health wasn't damaged, their existence as a future generation is contaminated for a long time.

By FREDERIC DELEPIERRE

[Blue box - VICTIMS]

## **VICTIMS**

### **Opinions vary among the victims and the officials.**

Some victims claim not to have been compensated. This is because they did not know what possibilities they had. Or they did but were too late, for example after a long convalescence in the hospital. Some claim they have filed all the necessary documents but their case had no continuation. Finally there are those who have not made any attempt at receiving compensation, because they knew their case would be judged unobtainable by the authorities.

In Bhopal any handicapped or sick person attributes their ailments to the 1984 gas leak. Alternatively, they may blame the government for neglecting them. The government has frozen their estimates on the actual extent of the tragedy:

- 3828 dead identified;
- 40 definitive and total incapacitations;
- 173 382 temporary handicaps, without incapacitation;
- 155 203 temporary injuries, without handicaps;

This adds up to 362 540 total victims. However, only 80 000 demands for reparation were filed in. Why? F. D-E.

[TEMOIGNAGE]  
ACCOUNT

### **Seenabi: 'My daughter died at 25 years old'**

Bafna colony is one of the working-class neighbourhoods, like many in Bhopal. Most of its streets resemble earth roads. The sidewalks resemble more a gallery of improvised containers. On the left side of a narrow alley is a wooden door half-eaten by humidity. An old lady leans against the door. 'My name is Seenabi, I'm 70 years old', she says a little intimidated. 'My husband and I lived here when the catastrophe struck. We were both gravely affected by the gas. I can barely see. My husband cannot walk long, not to mention running – his lungs hurt so much.'

In a small house with blue walls, sitting on the very dirt of the ground are Seenabi's grandchildren. They await better days. 'One of my daughters died at the age of 25 because of the gas. I only got 25 000 rupees (400 euros) reparation. We carry on. Like we always did.'

F. D-E.

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## **BHOPAL, 25 YEARS LATER: A THREE-DAY COVERAGE**

Wednesday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>

Victims are abandoned

Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>

Bodies and souls forever scarred

Friday, December 4<sup>th</sup>

A pile of rust smelling of death

[Page 1: RETROACTES]

## **A RETROSPECTIVE**

### **Disaster announced in advance**

**1969** Union Carbide builds a pesticide factory in Madhya Pradesh, in the middle of India in order to improve yearly harvests of a country facing a full-fledged demographic crisis.

**1977** The Indian government demands the construction of a second plant, threatening not to prolong the exploitation licence for Carbide India.

**1978** A new plant, designed to produce 5 000 tonnes of pesticides a year, is built in Bhopal, capital of the state inhabited by no less than 300 000 people.

**Sevin**, the Indian division of Union Carbide produces Temik and Sevin, pesticides composed essentially of methyl isocyanate (MIC), an extremely toxic and irritating substance.

The MIC can be quickly neutralised if enveloped with caustic soda. Generally, this dangerous liquid should be kept at sub zero temperatures, above which it transforms into a gas heavier than air and equally toxic to chlorine.

**Demography** Attracted by good salaries as well as electricity and running water, the population around the industrial area grows very quickly: from 385 000 inhabitants in 1971,

through 671 000 in 1981 up to 800 000 in 1984. Today, the city's population is two million, most of which lives below the poverty line.

**Incidents** In 1978, the factory experienced first minor incidents. A dangerous fire broke out later that year. Several gas leaks occurred afterwards, between 1981 and 1983. The casualties amounted to one dead and forty seven injured. The plant thus became a bone of contention between the government and the opposition who demanded its closure. In the meantime, in 1982 a detailed inspection pointed out ten major deficiencies within the factory's security system.

**Deterioration** Since 1982 the factory begins to bring loss, as its products cannot be sold in sufficient amounts. The idea of closing the plant down resurfaces in the parliament. The Indian government is unwilling to do so, in order not to discourage potential investors. Exploitation costs are being reduced.

**1984** The plant is temporarily closed down several times. If it does work, it is only at reduced capacity. Two out of ten deficiencies pointed out back in 1982 have still not been addressed. On the night of December 3<sup>rd</sup>, a large amount of water enters the silo E610, which contains MIC. A leak causes 42 tonnes of MIC to escape the tank. No caustic soda is available to avoid the gas' lethal spread.

**Warren Anderson** Union Carbide's CEO arrives at the site December 4<sup>th</sup>. He is arrested and expelled. On December 6<sup>th</sup> the factory is finally closed down and dismantle works begin. A long legal battle ensues. It is finally over on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1989 with Union Carbide being sentenced to pay the Indian authorities 470 million dollars of damages. The government begins to pay the reparations to victims, but most of them feel abandoned. Warren Anderson died having escaped punishment.

F. D-E.