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Bhopal's poisonous legacy

By Gary Cohen | December 2, 2004

TWENTY YEARS ago today, families in Bhopal, India, were awakened in the middle of the night by terrible burning in their eyes and lungs. Within minutes, children and mothers and fathers staggered into the street, gasping for air. As they ran in complete terror, someone yelled that the Union Carbide pesticide factory had exploded, spewing out poisonous gas throughout the city.

Soon thousands of people lay dead in the city's main roads, with every truck, taxi, and ox cart weighted down with injured and terrified refugees. No one in the emergency room at the city hospital knew what the toxic gases were or how to treat the flood of patients. By the morning, more than 5,000 people were dead and a half million more were injured.

Bhopal has rightly been called the Hiroshima of the chemical industry. Bhopal not only represents the stark story of the human fallout from a chemical factory explosion but offers up important lessons about the culture of the chemical industry and its approach to security and public health.

The sad reality is that we continue to learn about chemicals by allowing industry to expose large numbers of people to them and seeing what happens.

In this way, we have learned about dioxin contamination by letting Dow, Monsanto, and other chemical companies expose American soldiers and the entire Vietnamese population to Agent Orange. We have learned about asbestos by killing off thousands of workers with lung disease. And we have learned about the long-term effects of methyl-isocyanate after Union Carbide gassed an entire city in India.

Since the Bhopal disaster, we've learned that we all carry the chemical industry's toxic products in our bodies. Every man, woman, and child on the planet has a body burden of chemicals that are linked to cancer, birth defects, asthma, learning disabilities, and other diseases.

Since Sept. 11 we have also learned that in addition to our routine chemical exposures, chemical factories are perfect targets for terrorists. According to federal government sources, there are 123 chemical facilities nationwide that would put at least 1 million people at risk if they accidentally exploded or were attacked by terrorists. Some of these chemical factories are located in major cities. Yet the chemical industry continues to

resist any meaningful regulation that would require them to replace the most dangerous chemicals with safer alternatives.

A recent "60 Minutes" expose vividly showed many of these facilities lack even the most basic security protection, yet the government is spending billions of our tax dollars invading other countries and looking for chemical terrorists overseas.

Twenty years have passed, but today in Bhopal thousands of people remain sick from chemical exposure and more than 50,000 are disabled due to injuries. The amount of compensation Union Carbide paid to the survivors has not been enough to cover basic medicines, let alone other costs associated with disabilities and a lack of ability to work.

The abandoned factory site remains essentially the same as the day that Carbide's employees ran for their lives. Sacks of unused pesticides lie strewn in storerooms; toxic waste litters the grounds and continues to leak into the neighborhood well water supply.

Officials at Dow Chemical, the new owners of Union Carbide, claim they have nothing to do with the ongoing disaster in Bhopal. Yet Dow may soon be faced with a subpoena from the Bhopal court to present its subsidiary Union Carbide in a criminal case or face action for obstructing justice. And the New York District Court may soon order Dow to clean up the toxic mess left behind by Carbide 20 years ago.

On this 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, survivors in Bhopal will march and make speeches and demand their basic rights to be free of chemical poisons, to be compensated for damages, and to hold Dow Chemical and Union Carbide liable for the world's worst industrial disaster.

The Bhopal survivors are not only speaking for themselves but for us as well. In the last two decades, Bhopal has come much closer to home. The chemical terror they experienced and the lack of care and respect they have received are haunting reminders that we are living under a similar poison cloud.

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