

HEALTH & RIGHTS

Combating inequality

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Thelma Narayan

tells how an
international
campaign has
supported the
case of victims of
an industrial
disaster in India.

Bhopal has come to symbolise industrial disasters. The world's worst industrial accident occurred here in December 1984 when a massive leakage of toxic gases from a pesticide plant affected over 500,000 people. Unaware of the potential hazard of the 'neighbourhood' plant, or of precautions to be taken in the event of an accident, the innocent paid dearly with their lives and health. Government of India estimates are of 1,700 dead in the early phase; unofficial estimates are higher. As always, the poor were worst affected.

Devastated lives

Today, sickness and death rates are even higher and studies suggest that they will continue to rise. Immune and respiratory systems have been damaged,

tion agreed to by the company and the Government is far too small, and has yet to reach the people.

The Government has provided food rations and medical care, has undertaken research and has taken up the case in court. However, these efforts have been tardy, limited, and unimaginative. For example, there are still 100,000 victims living in the officially declared 'gas affected' areas who have not been registered, while 45 per cent of claimants have not been medically examined. Over 90 per cent of examined claimants are categorised as having suffered only temporary injury or no injury at all, contradicting research findings of the Government itself and those of voluntary organisations.

A sign of hope has been the springing up of peoples' organisations in Bhopal and of solidarity groups worldwide who keep the issue alive. Conferences have been held, research conducted and contacts made. In particular, the participation of affected women has been remarkable. Through their initiatives, interim monetary relief was given to affected families, while the case of criminal negligence and a challenge concerning the amount of compensation has been taken to court.

Organised violations

The Permanent Peoples Tribunal is an international quasi-judicial forum that examines violations of the rights of people. In November 1992, the Tribunal held its Third Session on Industrial and Environmental Hazards and Human Rights in Bhopal and Bombay.

The cases of thirteen Asian groups, including that of Bhopal, were heard. They included environmental and health problems caused by open-pit gold mining in the Philippines and radioactive hazards faced by the Bukit Merah community in Malaysia. Industrial environmental hazards were considered by the Tribunal, not as unavoidable, but as organised violations of the fundamental rights of humanity to life, health and access to justice.

A long road to justice

The Tribunal and other groups have emphasised the right to information and the need for independent medical assessment following industrial disasters. At the same time, the persistence of peoples' organisations, movements and their networks have been of crucial importance in highlighting these disasters.

While there is still a long road ahead in the cause of justice for the victims of Bhopal, the lessons that have been paid for need to be learned and remembered. Bhopal is not just a freak accident, but represents many, often less dramatic, instances of industrial hazards. That this is a cause of serious ill health needs wider recognition and action to be evolved at local, national and international levels.

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■ Demonstration march by victims of the Union Carbide gas leak disaster at Bhopal.

leading to an increase in abnormalities in different parts of the body. For example, people have recurring infections and a variety of worsening symptoms; women experience more abortions (miscarriages) and gynaecological problems than they would have normally; and chromosomal abnormalities have been revealed. Infections, respiratory problems, dimness of vision and difficulty in concentrating have altered the course of children's lives.

All ages now suffer from anxiety, nightmares and grief – reactions to a sense of hopelessness. The working and earning capacity of people have been badly affected. Several victims say that those who died were the luckier ones.

A sign of hope

The response of all concerned has been inadequate in the face of this enormous human suffering. The multinational company responsible has not provided information on the nature of the gases, thus hampering treatment. After prolonged litigation, the compensa-

■ **Reference:**
Permanent Peoples Tribunal, 1992, *Findings and Judgements: Third Session on Industrial and Environmental Hazards and Human Rights*, 19-24 October, Bhopal - Bombay (India) India Secretariat, PPT, K-14, (FF) Green Park Extension, New Delhi 110 016