

How many died in Bhopal?

 bhopal.net/old_bhopal_web/oldsite/death-toll.html

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A reply to the Houston Chronicle from Tim Edwards of the UK Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, he who in 1999 cycled from Brighton, England to Bhopal, a distance of 6,000 miles, to raise money to buy medicines for Dow-Carbide's victims. Here is what Tim had to say:

Dear Houston Chronicle,

its great that you were present to cover Diane's action. That she keeps putting her body on the line deserves covering in itself. I enjoyed the inadvertent humour of the Dow rep fretting about how Diane could have got into the site when you had already described her simply climbing over a fairly low fence.

The only problem with the report, as it appears on the web, are the figures given for the number of deaths attributable to Carbide's gas. It is a problem that manifests again and again in press coverage of these issues and the reason for it is simply that definitive figures do not really exist. To gain a fair sense of the proportion of the disaster requires taking into account a whole number of variables not normally accessible to the more casual enquirer. In this context, to give such a precise figure as 3,849 is extremely misleading - albeit unintentionally I'm sure.

Why we say at least 8,000 died in the immediate tragedy

The figure of 3,500-7,000 you may have yourself read in the past refers to the people who were killed on the first night or who died in the immediate aftermath. Carbide has always claimed a much lower figure. I seem to recall them claiming soon after the disaster that "only 1,408 had died". But we reckon the figure is a minimum 8,000 for the immediate deaths. This is based on the fact that some 7,000 shrouds were sold in Bhopal in the three days following the gas leak, revealed by an international health organisation's study at the time. It does not take into account the fact that countless un-named victims were flung into mass graves (and transported by Indian army trucks to forests and rivers and dumped there) and taken to mass burials in other cities (one of our friends, a boy called Sunil, woke up to find himself in a pile of

corpses in a town about 20 miles from Bhopal. He was lucky not to be burned alive). At the railway station a whole tribe of gypsies was encamped and every single one perished, men, women and children. Not one was left alive to say who they were, or what their names were. Many people couldn't prove the deaths of their family members because they lacked the requisite documents. As an example, one man lost sight of his young daughter in the stampede to escape the gas: he never saw her again, but without papers couldn't prove to the authorities that she'd ever even existed, leading to him into a kind of Kafkaesque nightmare. In this way, guessing that at least a thousand people were simply never reported dead, we reckon that at minimum 8,000 people died in the immediate tragedy.

The toll may have been much higher

A Bhopal Municipal worker, Mohammed Karim, has told us that he used to drive a municipal waste-disposal truck. Here is his testimony, exactly as it was recorded:

The testimony of Mohammed Karim

"I used to drive a truck to dispose of dirt and waste. My truck was also a special truck - I used to pick up unclaimed dead bodies from the mortuary, I was used to doing it. That night (3rd December 1984) I put in thousands of bodies that we dumped - in one grave we would put 5-6 bodies, and we burnt piles and piles with logs. Many bodies were burnt unidentified - Muslims were burnt and Hindus were buried.

"They (the govt.) said 'leave your wives and children in your houses and go on duty'. We used to be on duty till 12:00 at night and after that the military trucks used to come and dump the bodies in the Narmada river. This went on for three to four days. Even on the 16th (of December 1984) we had to come back again. They gave us R500 for this but then they took it back from our wages.

"We would fit 120 bodies in one truck and this we would fill and empty five times a day. There were eight trucks on duty (so that is 4,800 bodies a day). It carried on for exactly the same intensity for three to four days, and after 12:00 am the military took over.

"We took a bulldozer and dug pits to bury all the animals. Some people were picking up bodies and some animals. 50 - 60 drivers were all working that day (3rd December). We picked up the bodies with our own hands. Every time we picked one up it gave out gas. The bodies had all turned blue, and had froth oozing from their mouths.

"In some houses everyone had died so there was no one to break the locks. In one case a 6 month old girl had survived and everybody else (mother, father and siblings) was dead. I broke the locks to that house.

"At least 15 - 20,000 people died in those first few days. What they said in the papers was absolutely wrong. What could I have done? I was a government servant. What the government said was absolutely wrong but what could I do?

"Those who have survived are like the living dead. My lungs have become useless: till today I'm being looked after by Hamidia hospital. Ever since I got affected I get vertigo - I would have to stop my truck because I get vertigo if I drive. My hands and feet don't work, I can't see well. The last two to three years I've gotten much worse."

If Mohammed Karim is right - and he was there - even the initial death toll could have been as high as 20,000. As I say, we assume a minimum of 8,000. The rest of the total of 20,000 - 30,000 dead comes from those who died in the years following exposure.

Those who died in the years following the disaster

It must be remembered that Bhopal, like many Indian cities, is a breeding ground for TB and other awful diseases, and that these were exacerbated and worsened by the gas - but their victims are not counted. The higher figure only includes deaths from injuries stemming directly from exposure to the gas. People in Bhopal are still dying of gas-related injuries at an average rate of 20 to 30 people per month, and we are nearly 18 years down the line. The numbers of people dying in earlier years was much higher than now. For example in 1997 the Madhya Pradesh Department of Gas Relief and Rehabilitation announced that about 1,400 people had died that year alone of gas-related illnesses. The Office of the Medical Commissioner on the 1st December 1999 had registered 22,149 directly related deaths. Again, not all gas-related deaths are registered. Many gravely ill people had left Bhopal. Others simply never found their way into the statistics.

Taking all of this into consideration it is perfectly possible that even the highest estimate of 30,000 deaths is too low. But I must make the point that in the case of Bhopal there is really no need to invent inflated death tolls. No point at all. The facts are so horrific that statistics are soon meaningless. The worst thing about this tragedy is how wretched is the condition of the survivors - people who in return for nearly 18 years of suffering with dreadful illnesses have received "compensation" of around \$500. We calculate that this is just enough to

buy one cup of tea per day. (By contrast, the *Times of India* reported that Alaskan sea-otters during the Exxon-Valdez disaster were fed airlifted lobster at a cost of \$500 per otter per day.)

The continuing medical nightmare of Dow-Carbide's victims

From what do the gas survivors in Bhopal suffer? In the districts near the factory, people are wracked by breathlessness, blurred vision, aching limbs and backs; numb limbs; there are monstrous births; children suffer from recurrent fevers and coughs; even young adults are developing cataracts and feel constantly exhausted, with no appetite either for food or for life; Carbide's gases have added depression and anxiety to their already hard lives. In our free Sambhavna Clinic (which opened in 1996, funded by donations received from the public in the UK and USA) our doctors are seeing evidence of a menstrual chaos among the affected population. Girls who had been babies, or in the womb at the time of the gas, have now reached puberty. Some do not menstruate at all, or have a period only once in three months, while others bleed three times a month. No work is being done on this, except by our Clinic. It remains an officially unacknowledged epidemic. Other things, too, were missed. A report from the Clinic observes, "The alarming rise in cancers, tuberculosis, reproductive system problems and other problems such as growth retardation among children born after the disaster remain undocumented."

People are being poisoned again by Dow-Carbide's abandoned chemicals

The people living near the abandoned factory - where piles of dangerous chemicals lie in the open air to this day - I have seen them myself - are obliged to drink water heavily polluted with Sevin residues, 12 volatile organic chemicals, heavy metals and mercury millions of times higher than recognised safety limits. The water makes people ill, with the same kind of symptoms as those who had been exposed to the gas in 1984. Here too, the death toll is high. And the real pollution feeding the local aquifers lies under the ground, where around a thousand tonnes of numerous chemicals were routinely dumped during normal operations at the factory prior to the gas leak.

The Madhya Pradesh government's own figures highlight how the scale of the health holocaust roars on unchecked. For example, the latest report of the Department of Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation (December 2001) states that the number of patients visiting government hospitals (meant for gas victims) has continued to be over 3,500 per day for the last 5 years. The same report says that respiratory and ocular diseases have remained 3 to 4 times higher among gas victims than in the

unexposed population. That these figures have stayed the same proves that there has been no meaningful or effective intervention.

Why we say there are up to 150,000 people still seriously ill in Bhopal

We estimate that there are between 120,000 to 150,000 people still seriously ill in Bhopal. By which I mean suffering from chronic, disabling conditions which in many cases do not permit them to work, so they are wretchedly underfed and this further exacerbates their health problems. The figures quoted above are arrived at on the basis of estimates made by the International Medical Commission for Bhopal (IMCB), data collected by the Department of Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation, the government of Madhya Pradesh, as well as estimates of children born to gas exposed parents since the disaster, community-based surveys carried out by the Sambhavna Trust and the findings of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

Sorry to go on at length but I simply wish you to be aware of the facts and they are, unfortunately, complex. Please do visit our website, www.bhopal.net, for more information on the various issues around this longest disaster.

thanks for your attention
best regards

tim edwards
