

This Week in History

An industrial disaster in India in 1984 killed 25,000 people.

During this week in 1984, the city of Bhopal — *boh-PAL* —, India, became the site of the worst industrial disaster in history. **What do you think “industrial disaster” might mean?** (A tragedy related to industry or business, especially one that has to do with factories.) The health effects of this disaster are still being felt in Bhopal, and its people are still calling for justice.

Bhopal, located in central India, has about 1.8 million residents. In 1969, an American company called Union Carbide Corporation built a factory right outside Bhopal. Union Carbide started this factory to make pesticides. **What are pesticides?** (Chemicals that kill pests, like insects, and other animals, without harming the main crops.) Many people in Bhopal worked at the factory, and many thousands lived in a neighborhood that grew up around the plant. Pesticides can be very dangerous to make. **Why?** (They involve chemicals that are harmful to humans.) The factory in Bhopal was working with methyl isocyanate — *METH-ihl EYE-soh-SYE-ehn-ate* — or MIC. MIC is one of the most dangerous chemicals ever made by scientists. Breathing even a little of this chemical can cause people to get very sick. It becomes even more deadly when it is exposed to water. This causes a chemical reaction producing a deadly gas, which is twice as heavy as regular air.

Because of this danger, the factory in Bhopal was supposed to observe many safety regulations. Unfortunately, by 1984, a lot of these safety regulations were being ignored. The Indian division of Union Carbide had cut back on workers, on alarm systems, and on safety training. The MIC tank was filled too full, and it was not kept at the right temperature. Some American engineers reported that the plant was dirty and poorly run, but no one did anything to change the situation. **Why do you think Union Carbide let the situation get so bad?** Newspapers in Bhopal warned that the factory was a tragedy waiting to happen.

On the night of December 2nd, 1984, that tragedy happened. Somehow, a large amount of water got into the MIC tank.

This caused a huge reaction of deadly gas inside the tank. The alarm did

not go off in time, and workers could not stop the reaction. Starting just after midnight on December 3rd, MIC started to leak from the plant. Over the next two hours, about 40 tons of this deadly gas escaped into the air. About half a million people in Bhopal breathed this gas, many as they slept. As many as 7,000 people died instantly, and thousands more died over the next few weeks, for a total of about 25,000. Many other people continue to have health problems from their exposure to MIC. A report that came out in 2014, claimed that as many as 150,000 survivors were still struggling with chronic health conditions, including nerve damage, breathing problems, birth defects, and higher rates of cancer. Despite the government’s promises to clean up after the disaster, the water in Bhopal’s poorest neighborhoods is still extremely polluted today. **Can someone read the message on the wall in the photo here? What does it tell you about the ongoing situation there?**

Some of Union Carbide’s plant safety managers were fined and jailed for two years. The company has sent checks for about \$2,000 to the families of people who died in the accident, and smaller amounts to those injured. **Does that seem like enough?** But the company has never officially apologized or taken responsibility for the disaster, or even paid for cleanup. And the top officials of Union Carbide have never been fined or jailed. Dow Chemical, which bought Union Carbide in 2001, says that an employee put the water in the tanks on purpose. **No matter what happened, do you think Union Carbide and Dow are still at fault? Does Dow have a responsibility to help those hurt by the company it bought? Why or why not?** END

