

Bhopal Gas Tragedy

The Bhopal disaster was a gas leak incident on the night of 2-3 December 1984 at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. Over 500,000 people were exposed to methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas. Thousands were killed in this world's worst industrial accident.

How did it happen?

The incident had taken place at the Plant Number C of the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal. As the cool morning breeze picked up pace, it carried the poisonous gas leaking from the Union Carbide factory to rest of the city and killing people - both awake and asleep. It is estimated that about 40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas and other chemicals leaked from the Union Carbide factory. Methyl isocyanate is extremely toxic and if its concentration in air touches 21 ppm (parts per million), it can cause death within minutes of inhaling the gas. In Bhopal, the level was multiple times higher.

What caused MIC leakage?

As per official record, methyl isocyanate got mixed with water used for cooling the plant. The mixture led to generation of volumes of gases, which put tremendous pressure on Tank Number 610. The tank cover gave way to building gaseous pressure, releasing tonnes of the poisonous gas, which diffused over

large area. Approximately 5 lakh people were exposed to the leakage of methyl isocyanate gas.

Post-leakage scene

Bhopal gas leakage caused internal hemorrhage, pneumonia coughing, itching in eyes, skin and breathing problems. Patients complained of dizziness, breathlessness, skin irritation and rashes, some other reported sudden blindness. Doctors of Bhopal had never faced a situation like this. They had no experience in dealing with industrial disaster.

Unlike today, Bhopal of 1984 did not have too many hospitals. Two government hospitals could not have accommodated half of the population of the city. People were suffering, finding it difficult to breathe and confused. So were doctors, who did not immediately know the reasons for the sudden illness that afflicted every new rushing patient. The two hospitals reportedly treated around 50,000 patients in first two days of the Bhopal gas leak.