

## News

**Bhopal residents stay clear of disaster site**

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BHOPAL, India (Reuter) - More than half the poison chemical remaining at a Union Carbide plant has been neutralized, but thousands of city residents refuse to return home to the site of the world's worst industrial disaster.

Arjun Singh, chief minister of Madhya Pradesh State, told reporters yesterday that eight of the 13 tons of methyl isocyanate stored in the factory had been converted into pesticide since Sunday.

"If neutralization continues at the same rate, the operation should be completed in another two days," he said.

Srinivasan Varadarajan, head of a team of U.S. and Indian scientists processing the gas, said the pesticide produced through conversion was free of MIC, which leaked from a storage tank at the factory on Dec. 3 and killed about 2,500 people.

Nearly 250,000 of Bhopal's 700,000 residents have fled the city since the disaster, and many say they will not return home immediately.

Anwar Shah, who owns a farm at Mundideep, 32 kilometres from Bhopal, said 30 people had taken shelter in a building on his land.

At least 6,000 refugees, including large numbers of women and children, have sought shelter in Mundideep.

Thousands more went further south to stay with relatives, while others left Bhopal in the daytime and returned in the evening after the neutralization process was completed for the day, retired army Brig. K. K. Khanna said.

Hamid Khan, 27, now living with his two sisters in a nearby village, said he would stay away from Bhopal until all the poison gas was gone.

Reuter correspondent **Chaitanya Kalbag** toured the factory, owned by a subsidiary of Union Carbide, and quoted one scientist as saying: "Everything is normal and safe."

Another scientist, M. Sriram, said there is an emergency evacuation plan if another leak occurs, but "I am sure I will not have to punch the panic button. You can see everything is running smoothly."

A helicopter doused the plant with water to trap any gas that might escape, as top scientists monitored the conversion process and paramilitary troops and police guarded the plant.

The security forces kept people two kilometres from the factory, which is situated in the old quarter of the city. They also patrolled other parts of the city where looting had been reported at the homes of people who had fled, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

Many small restaurants and tea shops reopened for the first time yesterday and jeeps could be seen carrying families and their belongings home. But most shops stayed closed with padlocked shutters covering doors and windows.

Mr. Singh said he would make a special appeal to businessmen to reopen their shops.

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