

Bhopal victims try to rebuild lives

HUNDREDS of people stand outside the drab white bungalow, clutching yellow X-ray folders and medical prescriptions in a line stretching down the driveway flanked by dry, leafless bushes.

A chorus of dry coughs punctuates the slow progress of emaciated men, ragged children and ghost-like Muslim women covered head-to-toe in veils and black robes towards the verandah.

Half a kilometre to the east looms the reason for the hospital in this central Indian city — the pesticide factory owned by the Indian subsidiary of the US Union Carbide Company where a poison gas leak last December killed 2,500 people.

Opposite the factory sprawls the shantytown of Jaiprakash Nagar where more than 800 people died among the huts built with canvas and wood from packing cases. Dozens of huts whose owners have died or fled stand empty.

Nearly four months after the world's worst industrial disaster the survivors are struggling to rebuild their lives, scarred by lethal methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas that burst from a storage tank at the pesticide factory on December 3.

Union Carbide chairman Warren Anderson said earlier this month that sabotage could not be ruled out in the leak, which also injured 250,000 people. Two senior Indian scientists have rejected Anderson's remarks.

In Bhopal, capital of Madhya Pradesh state, the 30-bed government hospital where the gas victims trek

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every day for medicine, X-rays and urine and blood tests has become the centre of their lives since it was set up on January 13.

But there are always more victims needing attention than beds and they rest on makeshift beds made of piles of red hospital blankets between the iron cots.

"Most of them stay for about two weeks and go away when they feel better," said Dr Shrinath Aggarwal. "But they have to return when the effects of the medicine wear off."

Dr M.M. Nanda, who is in charge of the hospital, said about 600 people were treated at its out-patient clinics every day.

"More than half of them are poison gas victims and they all complain of major respiratory problems," he said. "They cannot walk even 100 metres without running out of breath. We can only continue medication and hope they will improve."

Dr Nanda said many survivors showed signs of severe bronchial pneumonia, their lungs seared by the poison gas, and most of them complained of weakness that did not let them do any work.

In the hospital's female ward a woman sat cross-legged, dressed in a white sari, her face drawn in agony as she was racked by a bout of coughing.

Bibi Jan, 30, said two of her five

children died in the gas leak. "I have been in three hospitals since then and there is no improvement. I don't know who will look after my other children if I die," she said with tears in her eyes.

The gas acted more slowly on other victims.

In the next room a thin, dark boy lay fighting for breath as his parents stood by the bed, looking on anxiously.

Gopal Khushwaha, 14, said a month ago he suddenly developed severe lung pains, his eyes reddened, and he could not walk.

"Our lives have been destroyed by the gas," said his father Chhotelal.

The disaster also disrupted the lives of survivors who did not go to hospital.

In Jaiprakash Nagar's dusty, fly-infested lanes, several men sat gloomily on the doorsteps of their huts as women and children wandered listlessly under the fierce afternoon sun.

"I used to lift about 50 kg of luggage at the railway station before the gas leak," said porter Latif Khan, his cheeks covered with stubble. "Not now. So I sit at home, selling firewood."

Arvind Gupta, who has not been able to return to his job as a construction worker, said he sold ice on a nearby pavement.

"My 11-year-old daughter Mamta was in hospital three times but she has only worsened. She is at home now and only God can save her," he said, pointing to a little girl who lay covered with a blanket in the small

one-roomed hut.

The Poison Gas Disaster Struggle Committee, which has been spearheading a campaign for better relief for the victims, reported in a recent survey that most families had incurred large debts after they paid for hospitalisation.

"Most of the victims were poor slum-dwellers who worked as porters or labourers," said committee member Dr Anil Sadgopal. "Now they have only the medicine queues to look forward to."

The doctors said the disaster has left behind deep-rooted psychological problems among the victims.

In a small, whitewashed room near the factory, a team of six psychiatrists from the north Indian city of Lucknow counselled a growing line of patients outside the rough wooden door.

Dr Jitendra Trivedi, the team's leader, said he had prepared case histories of more than 80 victims in the past three weeks and was also dosing them with tranquillisers.

"All of them suffer from anxiety and depression," he said. "They fear a fresh gas leak. They have become emotionally vulnerable and often dream of seeing others die around them."

Dr Trivedi said a survey of 133 families in the area had shown that even older children were wetting their beds, and were prone to fits of hysteria and spells of unconsciousness.

"How do you rebuild the confidence of a family that has lost its father, or watched its children die?" he asked.

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