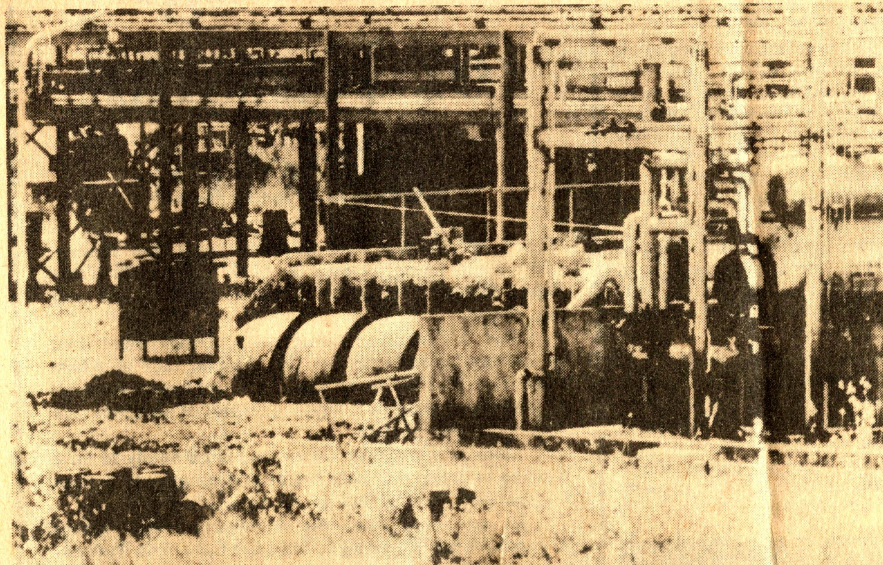


Bhopal gas leak container unearthed

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THE steel tank (lower left foreground) from which poison gas leaked is uncovered by probing officials. — Reuter picture

Bhopal (Reuter) — Investigators probing the world's worst industrial disaster have uncovered the steel tank from which poisonous gas leaked last December, killing 2,500 people, police said yesterday.

Excavation work began last week and the tank has been freed of its casing of concrete, sand and charcoal, police in this central Indian city said.

On December 3, deadly methyl isocyanate gas leaked from the tank at a pesticides factory of the Indian subsidiary of the US Union Carbide Company. About 125,000 people were injured in the leak.

Police said officials from India's Central Bureau of Investigation were exploring ways of opening the tank to establish precisely how the leak occurred.

Scientists have said entry of water into the tank may have set off a violent chemical reaction, forcing liquid methyl isocyanate stored there to burst through a safety valve in gas form.

They have said the tank, partly buried below ground, was now likely to

contain a plastic sludge that could yield clues as to how the tragedy happened.

Police threw a cordon around the pesticides plant as workers broke through the concrete casing to expose the blackened exterior of the tank.

Its steel walls had buckled, apparently under immense pressure when the gas escaped. Three broad steel rings secured the tank to its concrete base. Alongside was a refrigeration plant designed to keep the highly-volatile methyl isocyanate cool.

In New Delhi, Agriculture Minister Buta Singh told parliament yesterday the gas leak caused fish to become anaemic, stunted the growth of trees and reduced milk production from animals.

Presenting a detailed report prepared by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, he said traces of the gas had been found in trees, fruit and vegetables.

"While most vegetables recovered in the course of time, some have still not regenerated," Singh said.

More than 1,040 animals within a

four-kilometre (2.5-mile) radius of the plant had died and 7,000 people given medical care, he said.

"Animals were ill even before the leak, with breathing difficulties and a drastic drop in production," he said.

Meanwhile, the government decided on what action to take. Union Carbide, a government-owned firm, said yesterday.

V. Patil, minister of chemical fertilisers, told parliament yesterday that the firm had filed suit here or in the United States to agree to an out-of-court settlement.

"We have not decided what to do. Any decision must be in the best interests of the people," he said. Patil was speaking after the passage of a bill that gave the government exclusive right to recover compensation for victims of the disaster in the form of compensation.

In the United States, several people have filed lawsuits seeking millions of dollars in compensation from Union Carbide. The pre-trial hearing was set for April 16 before a federal District Court judge.