



A POLICEMAN carries a child to a Bhopal hospital for treatment after inhaling poisonous gas fumes which escaped from a Union Carbide factory in the city.

# Warkato Times 3 Future of Bhopal in doubt

By Chaitanya Kalbag of Reuters through NZPA

Bhopal. — The poison gas leak that killed 2500 people last December in this central Indian city has left the future of tens of thousands of people in doubt.

The biggest question mark hangs over the lives of about 125,000 people severely injured in the leak, which occurred at a pesticide factory owned by the Indian subsidiary of the US Union Carbide Company.

Nearly four months after the disaster, the survivors continue to wage a grim battle against the damage caused by the methyl isocyanate gas to their bodies and lives.

Government officials here said most gas victims had not been able to return to their old jobs as railway porters, construction workers or push-cart operators because their severely damaged lungs could not cope with heavy manual work.

"We have already spent more than 10 million rupees (NZ1.75 million) on medical relief," said Madhya Pradesh State's health services director Dr M. N. Naju.

"But hospitals registered about 177,000 gas victims, and we do not know how many of them will be restored to normal health," he said.

Dr Naju said a survey of 26,000 families in Bhopal last month showed a serious residue of medical problems.

He said most victims still suffered from eye ailments such as conjunctivitis and cataracts, severe respiratory trouble, chronic anorexia — loss of appetite — and severe damage to their windpipes and gastro-intestinal tracts.

State health secretary Dr Ishwar Dass said the greatest anxiety was caused by about 3000 pregnant women.

Doctors estimate about 500 of them were in the first three months of their pregnancies — the formative stage in which the foetus can suffer maximum damage — when the leak occurred.

"A team of gynaecologists is carefully monitoring them to see if poisoned blood got past the placental barrier to cause

genetic damage or lack of oxygen," Dass said.

But Dr Abha Sahu, head of a newly set up polyclinic near the pesticide factory, said doctors faced unforeseen problems with, the mainly illiterate victims.

"We advise badly affected pregnant women to go in for abortions. Most of them refuse although they may already have other children," she said.

Deprived of their livelihoods, most Bhopal victims are faced with an end to free rations distributed by the Government.

The city's top administrator, Moti Singh, said each gas victim was entitled to a free monthly quota of 12kg of wheat and rice, and a daily portion of milk.

But the emergency food supplies, started three weeks after the gas leak, are due to stop next week.

"About 600,000 people were receiving the free rations," Mr Singh said. "We have spent nearly 50 million rupees (\$NZ8.76 million) so far on such relief."

Also in doubt is the future of about 800 employees of the Union Carbide factory, which the Government has said will not be allowed to reopen.

Factory trade union secretary-general Mr R. K. Yadav said the workers continued to be paid wages by the management and did not know if they would eventually be dismissed.

Personnel manager Sibeswar Mitra said Union Carbide was trying to get government permission to resume operations.

"We can manufacture other non-lethal products even if production of methyl isocyanate is halted," he said.

"But we are not running a charitable institution and cannot continue to pay our workers their wages indefinitely."

Union Carbide faces dozens of lawsuits in US courts claiming compensation worth billions of dollars for the gas victims. The lawsuits are scheduled to come up for a pre-trial hearing in a New York court on April 16.