

Legacy of the Bhopal gas tragedy

By Chaitanya Kalbag
Bhopal. — The poison gas leak that killed 2,500 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 United States Union Carbide Company.

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 Dr M. N. Nagu, health services director of Madhya Pradesh state. Bhopal is the state capital.

"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 Nagu said a survey of 26,000 families in Bhopal 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, and severe damage to their windpipes and gastro-intestinal tracts.

The state's health secretary, Dr Ishwar Dass, said the greatest anxiety was caused by about 3,000 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," Dr 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 livelihood, 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 12 kg of wheat and rice, and a daily portion of milk.

But the emergency food supplies, started three weeks after the gas leak, were due to stop this week, he added.

"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."

He said the families of people killed in the disaster were given compensation of 10,000 rupees (\$NZ1,752) and 11,000 "seriously affected survivors" had been given 1,500 rupees (\$NZ274) each.

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.

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

He said that under Indian law an industrial worker is entitled to at least three months severance pay if he is sacked by his employers.

"But the Government has not issued any written order on our closure," he said. "We have all

registered with the local employment exchange, but not one worker has so far

found a new job. We are caught in an agonising situation."

The factory's personnel manager, Sibeswar Mitra, said Union Carbide was trying to get Government permission to resume operations at the 250-million-rupee (\$NZ43.8 million) factory.

"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 chairman Warren Anderson said last month that sabotage, or serious safety lapses by the Indian subsidiary, could not be ruled out in the leak.

Indian authorities have rejected Mr Anderson's remarks, saying they appear to be designed to reduce the United States company's liabilities in the world's biggest industrial disaster.

Union Carbide faces dozens of lawsuits in United States 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.

India has said it is prepared to go in for an out-of-court settlement if Union Carbide offers good compensation.

Madhya Pradesh law secretary Abdul Qureshi said a law just passed by the Indian Parliament could aid an out-of-court settlement.

The law allows the Indian Government to take over all litigation on behalf of the gas victims and supervise the speedy distribution of compensation.

Mr Qureshi said more than 2,000 local lawsuits had been filed in Bhopal against Union Carbide's Indian subsidiary. "Over 200,000 gas victims have registered with us for free legal aid," he said.

"The only way Union Carbide can buy peace is to quickly finalise the compensation issue directly with the Indian Government. That is the only way the survivors can start piecing together their shattered lives." — NZPA-
Reuter.