

World

Clean-up 40 years after Bhopal disaster is 'greenwashing', say campaigners

Hannah Ellis-Petersen
Delhi

Forty years after one of world's deadliest industrial disasters struck the Indian city of Bhopal, a clean-up operation has finally begun to remove hundreds of tonnes of toxic waste from the site.

Local campaigners have accused the Indian government of greenwashing, arguing that the 337 tonnes of waste removed this week represents less than 1% of the more than 1m tonnes of hazardous materials left after the disaster and that the clean-up has done nothing to tackle chemical contamination of the area.

There have also been protests over fears that the incineration of the waste will only lead to further contamination and toxic exposure in other areas.

At about midnight on 2 December 1984, the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal exploded, releasing 40 tonnes of toxic methyl isocyanate and other lethal gases into the air.

More than 3,000 people were killed in the immediate aftermath and at least 25,000 are estimated to have died overall.

Local groups have claimed the true number is probably even higher given the long-term effects of the poisonous gas, which include high rates of cancers, kidney and lung diseases. High numbers of babies have been stillborn or born with severe disabilities in recent years.

Despite the scale of the industrial disaster, a proper operation to remove all the toxic waste from Bhopal has never been carried out, either by the US company Union Carbide, now owned by Dow Chemicals, which

was the majority owner of the factory at the time, or by the Indian government, which took back control of the land where the factory stood.

Rights groups have accused the US corporations and the Indian government of attempting to play down the lasting impact of Bhopal's untouched chemical debris.

Official surveys submitted to the courts have shown that the contamination, which includes highly poisonous heavy metals and UN-banned organic pollutants, has spread to at least 42 areas in Bhopal. Testing near the site revealed levels of cancer-causing chemicals in the groundwater were 50 times higher than what is accepted as safe by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Lethal levels of toxic waste have also been found in factory pits and festering open ponds where the waste was being dumped by the Union Carbide factory prior to the explosion.

For years, campaigners have been fighting for Union Carbide and Dow Chemicals to be held liable for the cost of the clean-up and safe removal of the waste, a process which is expected to cost upwards of hundreds of millions of dollars, but the US corporation has always denied liability, citing a 1989 settlement with the Indian government.

In what was initially taken as progress, last month the Madhya Pradesh high court ordered authorities to finally take responsibility for the chemical waste, criticising the inertia of the past four decades and asking whether the government was "waiting for another tragedy".

The government has now removed 337 tonnes of overground waste that had already been put into containers and moved to a warehouse in 2005,

▼ Regular protests over decades, such as those in 2003 and, right, in 2018, have only now brought a partial clean-up

PHOTOGRAPH: AFP/GETTY IMAGES





which campaigners claim no longer posed a significant threat and was not contributing to the groundwater contamination.

Rachna Dhingra, a coordinator of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, called the move a “farce and greenwashing publicity stunt to remove a tiny fraction of the least harmful waste” and questioned why Union Carbide and Dow Chemicals were not being held accountable.

She said: “There’s still 1.1m tonnes of poisonous waste leaching into the ground every day that they refuse to deal with. We can see for ourselves the birth defects and chronic health conditions. All this does is take the heat off the government and lets the US corporations off the hook. It does nothing to help the people in Bhopal who for decades have been seen as expendable.”

Dhingra was also highly critical of the government’s decision to take the removed waste to be incinerated at a plant 150 miles away in Pithampur that has failed tests on conducting such operations safely and exposed local people to high levels of toxins.

The incineration, which is likely

▼ *The Union Carbide factory in Bhopal in 2009, the 25th anniversary of the horrific disaster*

PHOTOGRAPH: RAVEENDRAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



to take about six months, will create 900 tonnes of toxic residue, which will then be buried in landfills.

The move has provoked large protests by people in Pithampur who are fearful of further toxic exposure and leakages into their groundwater from the waste.

Swatantra Kumar Singh, the director of the state government’s Bhopal gas tragedy relief and rehabilitation department, denied there was any contamination risk and said the waste would be disposed of in an environmentally safe manner.

Many local people and human rights groups consider the Bhopal disaster to be a continuing miscarriage of justice. The 1989 settlement led to most victims receiving 25,000 rupees (about £940 at the time), while most of those who developed related conditions or died years later got nothing.

None of the nine Indian officials who were convicted in 2010 over their roles in the disaster served any time in prison, and Dow Chemicals has maintained in the courts that it is not criminally liable for the actions of Union Carbide’s Indian subsidiary before it bought the parent company.

Campaigners have accused the US government of blocking attempts to extradite Union Carbide and Dow Chemicals officials to face justice over failures that led to the explosion.

Later yesterday, separate Israeli airstrikes killed at least four people in central Gaza City and two in its Zeitoun district, medics said.

The latest deaths in Gaza came as the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the occupied West Bank ordered the suspension of broadcasts by the Qatar-based Al Jazeera across the Palestinian territories, accusing the network of incitement, official media reported.

Al Jazeera is already banned from broadcasting from Israel amid a long-running feud with the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government.

In September, armed and masked Israeli forces raided the Al Jazeera office in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, saying it was “used to incite terror”.

The military issued an initial 45-day closure order, prompting the Palestinian foreign ministry

to condemn “a flagrant violation” of press freedom. On Wednesday, however, the official Palestinian news agency, Wafa, said Al Jazeera’s “insistence on broadcasting inciting content and reports characterised by misinformation, incitement, sedition and interference in Palestinian internal affairs” had led to its suspension.

An Al Jazeera employee contacted by Agence France-Presse confirmed the network’s office in Ramallah had received a suspension order on Wednesday.

Wafa said: “The specialised ministerial committee, comprising the ministries of culture, interior and communications, has decided to suspend broadcasts and freeze all activities of Al Jazeera satellite channel and its office in Palestine.

“The decision also includes temporarily freezing the work of all journalists, employees, crews and

affiliated channels until their legal status is rectified due to Al Jazeera’s violations of the laws.”

Al Jazeera condemned the decision in a statement, saying it “aligns with Israeli occupation practices targeting its media teams”.

It accused the PA, which has partial administrative control in the West Bank, of “attempting to deter Al Jazeera from covering escalating events in the occupied Palestinian territories” including in Jenin and its refugee camp. The PA’s security forces have been engaged in weeks of deadly clashes with armed militants in Jenin, in the northern West Bank.

Analysts have suggested the PA’s security clampdown is being driven by a desire to reassert its frayed authority on the West Bank and also to send a signal to western countries, not least the incoming Trump administration.