Exposure: The human cost of corporate crimes in Bhopal portrayed in a photographic exhibition

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Hasan Ali has seven grown-up daughters. 'Our education has suffered because of our father’s illness, and the fact that we too have been ill at different times. Because of this, there are several problems related to our marriages,' says Kishwar, one of the seven daughters.

Greenpeace today launched a touring exhibition of photographs of Bhopal by world renowned Magnum photographer, Raghu Rai (1).

Exposure portrait of a Corporate Crime offers a unique insight into the human and environmental tragedy that has engulfed the Indian city since December 1984, when an explosion at Union Carbide’s pesticide plant released lethal gases into the city, causing the world’s worst industrial disaster.

The American Company responded by abandoning the contaminated plant, paying the survivors inadequate compensation and refusing to accept liability for the disaster. Exposure documents both the immediate aftermath of the explosion and the ongoing struggle of survivors determined to secure justice from the chemical giant even though they have lost their families, economic security and health.

This moving collection shows what happens when companies such as Union Carbide - now Dow (2) - are not held accountable for the disasters and pollution they cause. It gives a voice to the people whose lives have been torn apart by a corporate crime, said Ganesh Nochur, Campaigns Director of Greenpeace India, during the exhibition launch.

Raghu Rai arrived in Bhopal hours after the gas leak to find chaos as the dead were being buried and cremated and the hospitals overflowing with thousands of patients. Rai realised he was witnessing a disaster of unprecedented proportions and the start of a long nightmare for the gas exposed survivors.

"What I saw was to change my life. It was an unprecedented scene of chaos. What startled me most was the silence of death. Thousands of people had already died thousands more than died in the 11 September attack on the World Trade Centre. I vowed then and there to continue my work, to do all I could to show the world what happens to people when corporations are not held liable for their operations, when they re allowed to cut costs and safety standards when they operate abroad", said Raghu Rai.

To date, 20,000 have died from gas exposure and the effects are now extending into the next generation. 150,000 of the survivors are chronically ill and communities are drinking contaminated groundwater because Dow has still not cleaned up the dangerous chemicals Union Carbide left behind. (3)

The exhibition is launched in the middle of a series of protests that began after moves by the Indian government to reduce outstanding charges against Warren Anderson, Union Carbide’s Chief Executive Officer at the time of the disaster, from culpable
homicide to negligence (4). Anderson is the subject of an Interpol warrant but has been hiding in the United States since the disaster. He has never appeared in court to explain why his company flouted the same safety rules in Bhopal that it enforced at a sister plant in West Virginia, USA. If the Indian government reduces the charges, he will face a small fine or a maximum of two years imprisonment rather than a maximum custodial sentence of ten years. He will also not have to appear in India for trial.

Tara Bai, a Bhopal survivor who went on hunger strike for 19 days in July to protest the move to reduce charges against Anderson said: “I remember the night of the gas leak as though it were yesterday. I lost my child and could not conceive since. To see the culprits of this disaster being let off by a shameless government is too much to bear. They seem to treat the world’s worst industrial disaster as though it had been a car crash.”

“As the world prepares for the Earth Summit in South Africa, we fully expect governments to agree on the need for international instruments to ensure unethical companies are held fully accountable for horrendous crimes committed while pursuing profits. There must be no more Bhopals”, concluded Ganesh.

Greenpeace and Bhopal survivors organisations are campaigning to ensure Dow Chemical cleans up the factory site at its expense, as would be required in the U.S., provide long-term medical treatment for the survivors of the poison gas leak, ensure medical and economic compensation for the 2nd and emerging 3rd generation victims, provide clean drinking water to communities that are forced to consume contaminated groundwater and punish the guilty.(5)

Notes to Editor

(1) Born in 1942, Raghu Rai has been amazing the photographic world for over thirty years with his unique images. In 1993, he was honoured as the Photographer of the Year in the United States. Rai has been an associate of Magnum for over 20 years, an international agency that has been at the forefront of documentary and reportage photography for over fifty years. Exposure: Portrait of a Corporate Crime will be shown at the Mumbai Centre for Photography as an Art Form, National Centre for the Performing Arts, NCPA Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai, India from 14-24 August 2002. Opening event 13 August. Next showing at: Sandton, Johannesburg. Opening event August 27 Art Heritage Gallery, 205 Tansen Marg, New Delhi 16-25 September 2002. Opening event 15 September. The exhibition will continue to tour worldwide.

(2) In 2001, Dow Chemical and Union Carbide merged, becoming the world’s biggest chemical company. In buying Union Carbide, Dow not only bought the company’s assets but also its liabilities.

(3) In 1999, Greenpeace visited the abandoned factory to assess the environmental condition of the site and its surroundings. The team documented the presence of stockpiles of toxic pesticides as well as hazardous wastes and contaminated material scattered throughout the factory site. The survey found substantial and, in some locations, severe contamination of land and water supplies with heavy metals and chlorinated chemicals. The water is still used for drinking and cooking by thousands of people the live near the site.

(4) Rashida Bee, Tara Bai and Satinath Sarangi’s hunger strike inspired other people around the world. 52 year old Diane Wilson has been on hunger strike for 26 days outside the Dow chemical facility in her hometown of Seadrift, Texas, to support the Bhopal survivors nearly 18 years struggle for justice and in protest over the moves to reduce charges against Anderson. The decision on Anderson is expected at a court hearing at Bhopal District Court on August 26-27.

(5) Greenpeace is working as part of an international coalition of NGO groups named AaCcTt-Action Against Corporate Crime and Toxic Terror- whose constituent are: the Bhopal Gas Affected Women Stationery Workers Association, Bhopal Gas Affected Pensioners Association, Bhopal Group for Information and Action, National Campaign For Justice in Bhopal, The Other Media and CorpWatch.