

Seven Convicted over Bhopal Gas Tragedy



Elderly survivors hold posters as they wait for the verdict in the premises of Bhopal court in Bhopal, India, Monday, June 7, 2010. The court on Monday convicted seven former senior employees of Union Carbide's Indian subsidiary of "death by negligence" for their roles in the Bhopal gas tragedy that left an estimated 15,000 people dead more than a quarter century ago in the world's worst industrial disaster. (AP Photo/Prakash Hatvalne)

BHOPAL, India (AP) — An Indian court Monday convicted seven former senior employees of Union Carbide's Indian subsidiary of "death by negligence" for their roles in the Bhopal gas tragedy that left an estimated 15,000 people dead more than a quarter century ago in the world's worst industrial disaster.

The former employees, many of them in their 70s, were sentenced to two years in prison and ordered to pay fines of 100,000 rupees (\$2,175) apiece. All seven were released on bail shortly after the verdict.

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The subsidiary, Union Carbide India Ltd., was convicted of the same charge and ordered to pay a fine of rupees 500,000 (\$10,870). Union Carbide eventually sold its shares in the subsidiary company, which was renamed Eveready Industries India.

India's Central Bureau of Investigation, the country's top investigative agency, has said the plant had not been following proper safety procedures before the disaster.

Large groups of survivors and relatives, along with rights activists, gathered in the city and chanted slogans saying the verdict was too little, too late.

Early on Dec. 3, 1984, a pesticide plant run by Union Carbide leaked about 40 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas into the air in the city of Bhopal in central India, quickly killing about 4,000 people. The lingering effects of the poison raised the death toll to about 15,000 over the next few years, according to government estimates.

Local activists insist the real numbers are almost twice that, and say the company and government have failed to clean up toxic chemicals at the plant, which closed after the accident.

The verdicts, which were in a local court and are likely to be appealed, came as the case crawled through India's notoriously slow and ineffective judicial system.

The Central Bureau of Investigation had originally accused 12 defendants: eight senior Indian company officials; Warren Anderson, the head of Union Carbide Corp. at the time of the gas leak; the company itself and two subsidiary companies.

Seven of the eight Indian company officials were convicted Monday. The other one has since died. Anderson and Union Carbide have never appeared in court proceedings.

Union Carbide was bought by Dow Chemical Co. in 2001. Dow says the legal case was resolved in 1989 when Union Carbide settled with the Indian government for \$470 million, and that all responsibility for the factory now rests with the government of the state of Madhya Pradesh, which now owns the site.

Last July, the same court in Bhopal had issued a warrant for Anderson's arrest and also ordered the Indian government to press Washington for the American's extradition. The judge did not explain why Anderson or the American chemical company were not tried in absentia.

Anderson was briefly detained immediately after the disaster, but he quickly left the country and now lives in New York. It was not immediately clear if the Indian government had begun to process the Bhopal court's request. Extradition proceedings are usually mired in a complex tangle of legal paperwork and can take years to process.

Investigators say the accident occurred when water entered a sealed tank containing the highly reactive gas, causing pressure in the tank to rise too high.

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Union Carbide Corp., an American chemical company, said the accident was an act of sabotage by a disgruntled employee who was never identified. It has denied the disaster was the result of lax safety standards or faulty plant design, as claimed by some activists.

The Central Bureau of Investigation said the plant had not been following proper safety procedures.

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