

India's Court Orders Bhopal Compensation

July 20, 2004

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 10:23 a.m. ET

BHOPAL, India (AP) -- It will take at least three months to disburse hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation to victims of a 1984 gas leak in central India that killed 12,000 people and injured more than 20,000, an official said Tuesday.

The gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Madhya Pradesh state capital, Bhopal, was one of the world's worst industrial accidents.

U.S.-based Union Carbide paid \$470 million in compensation under a settlement with the Indian government in 1989. But only part of that money was given to the victims, with the last payment made in 2000.

On Monday, the Supreme Court ordered the government to distribute the remaining \$330 million to victims and relatives of the dead. The unspent money grew over the years because of interest and the rupee's depreciation.

An official at the Welfare Commissioner's office in Bhopal said determining the amount for individual victims will take several weeks and that the disbursal of funds will take at least three months.

Environmental groups and activists fighting for the victims hailed the court ruling.

"It's a great victory for the gas victims. It's not the end of their problems, but it will give them a lot of support they need," said Satinath Sarangi, a spokesman for Bhopal Group for Information and Action.

In the Dec. 3, 1984, accident, toxic methyl isocyanate gas leaked from Union Carbide's pesticide plant, leading to the

painful deaths and contaminating the water and soil.

Union Carbide, which is now owned by Dow Chemical Co., accepted moral responsibility for the disaster, but blamed it on sabotage by a disgruntled employee.

Sarangi said thousands of families are on the brink of starvation because their wage earners can no longer work due to illnesses caused by exposure to the gas.

Rehana Khan, a 22-year-old woman who has breathing problems and suffers from chronic abdominal pain, said the money will "provide a big relief to her family." Four members of her family say they are suffering because of exposure to the deadly gas.

Activists and groups representing the victims also want a review of the 1989 settlement by Union Carbide, claiming that if the accident had happened in the United States the payout would have been much higher. They now want Dow Chemical to respond to their demands.

"We understand the battle against Dow Chemical will continue," Sarangi told The Associated Press.

Dow Chemical, however, has said it was not involved in the tragedy and that it considers the original settlement -- approved by the Indian government -- to be final.

Sarangi also said that the victims will continue to press for the extradition of Warren Anderson, who headed Union Carbide at the time of the accident. India is pursuing criminal charges against Anderson, who lives in the United States.