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### **Bhopal plant still toxic ground**

Shemin Joy, Bhopal, Aug 1, 2013, DHNS :

A broken boundary wall of the Union Carbide factory allows people to easily get in, play cricket and steal rusted machines.

This scene bears testimony to the government's callousness in dealing with the gas tragedy that ravaged Bhopal 30 years ago.

Spread over a 35 hectare plot, where tonnes of toxic waste has been buried since its inception in 1969, the factory now resembles a ghost house where a few old security men with lathis roam and some elderly men rear cattle oblivious to the looming threat beneath their feet. It was only Wednesday when five men were arrested for trying to steal machines from the now-dilapidated factory.

Experts from the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and activists of Satinath Sarangi-led Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA) among others have now formulated an action plan for ridding the site of high levels of contamination, demanding that the government take immediate and long-term steps.

During a visit to the factory site, where the leakage of methyl-isocyanate on December 4, 1984 left over 3,787 dead and around six-lakh people with injuries and other chronic problems, traces of deadly mercury can still be seen with the naked eye accumulated in the rusted machinery.

The abandoned "killer tank" from which the gas leaked on the night of December 4 still remains .

According to CSE Deputy Director General Chandra Bhushan, the danger still looms large despite the shutting down of the factory, three decades ago, with almost every study showing large-scale soil and water contamination inside and outside the premises.

T R Chauhan, a former supervisor of the plant which dealt with methyl-isocyanate, said since 1969 when the factory started its operation, toxic wastes were dumped inside the factory itself and at the Solar Evaporation Plant (SEP) about 15 hectares located outside the premises.

"Over the years, the waste has been a continuous source of soil and water contamination and therefore, a cause of serious public-health concern," Bhushan said.

A CSE analysis of 15 studies conducted by various government and non-government groups like CSIR, CPCB and NEERI have confirmed contamination and has more convergence than divergence, said CSE Programme Manager Amit Khurana.

The CSE has now come up with the suggestions from the expert group which consisted of stakeholders like CPCB, NGOs and presented it as an action plan which the government can now work on.

"Bhopal has become toxic and it was like talking on Bhopal has also become toxic (because of divergent views among stakeholders). It has changed and we have a common action plan for dealing with the toxic waste," he said.

Experts believe that the waste has been dumped up to two metres below the ground and it needs immediate removal. The action plan proposes immediate fencing and guarding of the factory to prevent access to people who may fall victim to the toxins.

Also witnessed is the construction activity at the SEP area which has to be prohibited.

The action plan also wants the immediate excavation, recovery and characterisation of waste dumped at the factory site. It is evident that people have encroached the SEP with constructed shanties.

It also recommends the detoxification, dismantling and decommissioning of the plant, machinery and structure while preserving the MIC plant and control room among others to make an "apt memorial" for the victims.

Experts and activists were also in agreement about the need for conducting a study about the effects of the gas tragedy a distance away from the plant.

"Most of the studies so far have concentrated on two-three kilometres near the plant. We need to study the impact of the tragedy, say in areas which are ten km far and so on," Bhushan said.

Saranghi said there had been quarterly monitoring by the Madhya Pradesh Pollution Control Board from 1998 but the state government scrapped it two years ago. "We don't have continuous monitoring," he said.