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Cleaning toxic footprints

Twenty-nine years since the deadly Bhopal gas tragedy, a fresh action plan to clean up the site

The remains of the Union Carbide factory, from which poisonous Methyl Isocyanate gas leaked — killing thousands and affecting lakhs in Bhopal on December 2-3 in 1984, continues to harm people even today. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), New Delhi, has analysed 15 studies conducted in the last 20 years by public and private institutions, has found that large scale soil and water contamination exists in the areas surrounding the plant.

“This is spreading every year in the ground water in the north-east direction of the plant, putting the health of thousands of residents at risk,” said **CSE’s deputy director general Chandra Bhushan**. CSE recently released an action plan to clean up the toxic remains in five years.

The plan is the outcome of a two-day round table conference of experts in Delhi in April. It comprised scientists, victims’ groups and specialists from government and non-government bodies. The Madhya Pradesh government did not participate in the conference, in line with its declared position of sticking to the implementation of court orders on the gas tragedy.

The plan suggests immediate, medium and long-term measures which would take up to five years. Immediate steps include fencing of the site and preventing rainwater runoff. It also calls for a ban on construction on solar evaporation pond sites which are contaminated. All contaminated and toxic material should be cleared in concert with locals under the supervision of the Central Pollution Control Board and combustible material should be incinerated at a suitable plant with proven capacity to conduct the task. The plan says this can be done in three to six months.

The medium and long term measures include hydraulic containment and other measures to stop contamination from spreading. It also includes characterisation and remediation of the toxic waste and decommissioning the plant, only retaining structures that are safe. The plan calls for an international competition to bring out the best master plan for remediation of the site with the cooperation of the local population.

CSE suggested that a memorial or a centre of excellence for industrial disaster management should be made on the site.

One of the outfits — Bhopal Group for Information and Action — which participated in the conference has decided to present the report to the Supreme Court to get it implemented.