

Twenty years on, Bhopal still bears the scars of

By David Orr

The cycle of death threatens to engulf yet another generation of Bhopal

BHAGWAN Singh and his family live in the shadow of the most notorious factory in India. Their modest house lies only a stone's throw from the disused Bhopal chemical plant where, on December 3, 1984, a catastrophic toxic leak claimed the life of their baby and more than 3,000 of their neighbours.

Twenty years on, courts in Bhopal will decide this week whether officials of the American Dow Chemical Company, which later merged with the plant's owners, Union Carbide, should face criminal charges — including manslaughter — over the disaster.

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stored at the site. The resultant medical problems of those who cannot afford to move away are a physical reminder of the tragedy. The mental scars will never heal.

"None of us can ever escape what happened that night," says Mr Singh, a former labourer at the plant.

"We used to be healthy but now I suffer from breathlessness and eye problems. My wife, Kasturi, is constantly ill with headaches, stomachache, respiratory difficulties and sore eyes. Our eldest son, Lalith, also has breathing problems and cannot do heavy work."

That December evening, Mr Singh had just returned home from a late shift when he realised that something was wrong. His eyes were stinging and he heard his father coughing in the courtyard where he slept.

Along with thousands of others who lived in the shantytown around the plant, the Singhs ran to escape the lethal methyl isocyanate gas.

"We could hardly breathe or see where we were going because our eyes were closing up," said Mr Singh, his words punctuated by rasping coughs. "There were people collapsing all

horror. Corpses lay all along the road. The silence of the streets was broken only by the moans of those who had survived.

It took an average of three

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around us. I was carrying Jogendra, our two-year old son. He became silent and his eyes were closed. They never reopened."

The next morning they returned home along a route of unspeakable

minutes for the victims to die as their lungs filled with fluid and their air passages constricted. Some succumbed in their beds, others huddled in doorways trying to shield young children from the

enveloping cloud of gas.

Campaigners claim that almost 20,000 have since died from the effects of the disaster and that 150,000 continue to suffer from the symptoms of chemical poisoning. They say these include cancer, anaemia, infertility and birth defects.

Today, under the control of the state government of Madhya Pradesh, the factory site lies abandoned and closed to the public. But city investigators say that thousands of tons of toxic waste are still stored there. In the monsoon season, the rains wash the chemicals into the ground water, contaminating local wells.

Union Carbide settled a civil suit in 1989 by agreeing to pay victims a total of \$470 million (£253 million). The Dow Chemical Company, which bought the American-owned company in 1999, maintains that it has no liability for the disaster and disputes charges of continuing environmental contamination.

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As the legal arguments approach a belated conclusion, Mr Singh would like a job to replace the one he lost.

"We got a lump sum of 100,000 rupees (£1,160) for the child who died and another 50,000 rupees (£580) per family member from Union Carbide," he said. "We built a four-room house with the money and we've just heard we're going to get another 50,000 rupees per person from the same fund. But this money can never compensate us for the loss of our son and of our health. We should be given jobs."

From the roof of a railway signal box, the rusting remains of the pesticide plant can be seen beyond the shacks of the shantytown. Although residents try to use water that is piped in or delivered in tankers, they say the municipal supply is inadequate. Even this week, people were drawing stinking water from condemned wells; some admitted to drinking it. The cycle of death threatens to engulf another generation. COURTESY LDT