

Bhopal church leaders applaud U.S. efforts for 1984 disaster victims

BHOPAL, India - Church leaders have welcomed a letter by U.S. Congress members asking Dow Chemical Co. to address the needs of victims of a 1984 chemical leak that killed thousands, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

A spokesman for Dow Chemical agreed the victims' needs should be addressed but told Catholic News Service a different company was responsible.

Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal said the move came "quite late, but better than never."

He welcomed the congressional recommendation as a "very positive step" in protecting survivors of one of the worst industrial accidents in history and said it signaled a renewed global understanding about their suffering.

Archbishop Cornelio said Dow Chemical had shirked its responsibility to remove thousands of tons of toxic waste accumulated at its Bhopal factory site. The congressional initiative may help the victims get justice, he told UCA News.

More than 3,000 people were killed in Bhopal Dec. 3, 1984, after tons of poisonous methyl isocyanate gas leaked from a Union Carbide pesticide plant. Within a week the death toll rose to 8,000.

In all, about 500,000 people were exposed to potential lethal waste. Advocacy groups say approximately 25,000 have died over the past 25 years because of air, soil and water pollution resulting from the leak.

Union Carbide has been owned by Dow Chemical since 2001.

In mid-June, 27 members of Congress wrote to Andrew Liveris, chairman and chief executive of Dow Chemical, asking him to meet the survivors' demands for medical and economic rehabilitation and to clean up soil and groundwater contamination in and around the factory site.

They also asked the company to send a representative to take part in court proceedings in India where a legal suit has been lodged with the Madhya Pradesh High Court against Dow Chemical and others. The suit demands safe disposal of the toxic wastes remaining at the Bhopal site.

Father Mathew Vattakuzhy, who heads a forum that coordinates Catholic social services in the state of Madhya Pradesh, where Bhopal is located, called the letter “a welcome step.” Father Vattakuzhy said the disaster continues to haunt the victims’ second generation.

“Many children born after the disaster in the affected areas continue to suffer various mental and physical disorders,” he said. Problems will continue unless Dow Chemical or the Indian authorities dispose of the toxic waste, he said.

Father Michael Sebastian, who heads the Bhopal Archdiocese’s social work department, said waste disposal should be carried out quickly to protect future generations.

Scott Wheeler, a spokesman for Dow Chemical, told CNS July 1 the company has a “deep sympathy for the victims of this tragedy, and we agree with these members of Congress that remediation should proceed.”

However, Wheeler said that the letter sent to Liveris by members of Congress was “wholly misdirected” and contained a number of inaccuracies. He said Union Carbide and Union Carbide India Ltd. settled their liability for the chemical leak with the government of India in 1989.

Wheeler said that Union Carbide sold its interest in Union Carbide India Ltd. in 1994, years before Union Carbide was acquired by Dow. Union Carbide India Ltd. continues to operate in India today as Eveready Industries India Ltd. Wheeler said that Eveready, not Dow Chemical, is the company that was involved in the Bhopal tragedy.