

COMMENT

R e m e m b e r i n g " B h o p a l "

24 YEARS ON AND THE SPECTRE of Bhopal gas tragedy continues to haunt hundreds of innocent victims. Nobody knows when they will get justice.

Even though senior UPA ministers as well as deputy chairman of Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia have supported absolving Dow Chemicals of any legal liability in the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy case, the Group of Ministers (GoM) on Bhopal headed by HRD minister Arjun Singh is not in favour of showing any leniency towards the chemicals giant.

Whether the victims can utilise this contradiction to their advantage is yet another matter. While agreeing to set up a commission to address the issues of cleaning up of the gas leak site and public health, the GoM has rejected Ratan Tata's offer to lead a trust of India Inc to pay for the clean-up.

The GoM, reportedly, was of the view that Tata's proposal was not merely an issue of funding the clean-up but contained an implicit condition that Dow be absolved of its liabilities. Rejecting Tata's proposal means that the legal liability of Dow shall be dealt in courts and not by an executive order as the cabinet secretary had already earlier suggested in a note.

Tata had reportedly suggested in 2006 to government that he was ready to head a Rs 100 crore fund to take care of the residual pollution and contamination issues. The letter came allegedly after an interaction of Dow officials with Tata at the US-India CEO Forum.

Dow wants the Rs 100 crore notice sent to it by the Indian government as a contingent payment for cleaning up of the tragedy site to be withdrawn as a precondition to it investing in India.

While several key Congress ministers had suggested resolving the issue in favour of Dow, the government has not been able to take a clear position.

The government, however, has failed to ensure release of 23 Bhopal activists, including 21 women, who were arrested on June 9 after a demonstration outside the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

In truth the issue of extradition of Union Carbide officials is yet to be decided, while the GoM, was of the view that extradition of Carbide officials would not yield anything substantial more than two decades after the leak.

However, the GoM is yet to decide on the transfer of intellectual property of UCC that the commerce ministry had permitted despite court orders. 25th anniversary of the tragedy is not far away but the point is no political party, left or right, is interested in the plight of gas victims. Rights activists and NGOs are, in reality, wandering in wilderness, to chase an 'invisible' giant. □□□