

‘Beyond Petroleum’

US President Barack Obama has reasons to talk tough about recklessness shown by British Petroleum (BP) because America is literally facing the worst environmental disaster in its recent history. Many say what is happening now in the Gulf of Mexico is an “environmental nuclear bomb”. A massive oil spill is taking place in the Gulf of Mexico—a catastrophe that threatens to become an epidemic Americans will be fighting for months and even years. In terms of cumulative damage it may surpass the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill that spewed millions of gallons of oil into Alaska’s Prince William Sound in 1989. Yet, it is not America’s Bhopal because the April 20 explosion on the Deep Water Horizon drilling platform, operated by BP killed only 11 workers while unleashing an underwater volcano of gushing oil from one mile below the water’s surface. Estimates are that 210,000 gallons of oil are spewing out everyday; the area covered by the spill stretches 240 miles east to west and 100 miles north to south. And the spill continues to spread impacting the public discourse in America’s sterile domestic politics.

So Obama vowed to force oil major BP to pay all clean-up costs and damages. And he lost no time to ask BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg to “set aside whatever resources are required to compensate the workers and business owners who have been harmed”. But what about Union Carbide and its ex-chief Warren Anderson? After all poor Indians are expendable. And American law doesn’t apply to Anderson, the prime accused in the Bhopal gas disaster case. The victims of Bhopal gas leak have no respite from being haunted by the 1984 nightmare, even after 25 years. Union Carbide, an American multinational, wholly owned by the notorious Dow Chemical, managed to buy immunity from all civil and criminal charges in exchange of a paltry compensation money. Anderson, the main culprit for the Bhopal mass murder, was never produced in the court. American offenders cannot be tried in Indian courts.

The recent verdict by a Bhopal Court in the disaster case convicting all the seven accused at worst mocks at the justice delivery system. 15000 dead and grave health problems for half a million. Maybe, the gravity of the sentence is itself a big joke—a two-year prison term. Then bail was granted within two hours of their sentencing. After 25 years of legal battle this judgement reducing the gas leak to a mere street accident has exposed myth of what they call the ‘biggest democracy of the world’. True, it is a democracy where mass murderers can go scot free. Many call it, and not without reason, a banana republic. The way Anderson was allowed to flee the country and avoid Indian jurisdiction, speaks volumes about India’s sovereign authority over its internal affairs. Uncle Sam can always let the poor Indians know it is still the sole superpower with divine sanctions to treat third world people as guinea pigs. The Anderson fiasco illustrates among other things that India is a failing, if not already failed state. Playing the blame game, in the wake of the Bhopal judgement cannot absolve

Indian politicians and government functionaries of their sin in the Bhopal tragedy.

For one thing, no mainstream party, left or right, came forward to agitate for the Bhopal gas victims. In the yester years they did nothing. In truth their total apathy and negligence bordered on crime against humanity. And today this caricature of justice could hardly move them. Bhopal doesn't count in vote equation. So they can easily ignore it though thousands of victims continue to live a miserable, if not unbearable, life. In a sense they envy the dead.

It remains to be seen how much BP is going to pay to compensate the damage caused by the Mexico Gulf oil spill. The hard fact is that the oil spill will have long-term impact on American environment and population. The spill endangers fragile salt-marsh lands, fresh-water ponds, creeks, lakes and other wetlands around the Gulf region, which contains upto 40 percent of total US wetlands. Whether BP admits it or not, at least 400 species—from shrimp to pelicans to river otters and many others—could be adversely affected by oil, including a dozen considered gravely endangered.

Meanwhile, the Gulf oil explosion has revived the debate globally whether the end of offshore drilling for oil is just in sight. Despite furore over clean energy whether they can really move away from fossil fuels actually depends on oil giants who finance American political culture. □