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Support for victims

Children of victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy can hope for free medical treatment again, thanks to the Supreme Court. Early this month, the Madhya Pradesh government barred hospitals from treating free of cost victims' children above 18 years of age. The Supreme Court has overturned this order, pointing out that victims' children too were affected by the toxic fumes that their parents inhaled way back in 1984, when 40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas leaked from Union Carbide's plant at Bhopal. Some 4,000 people died in the immediate aftermath of gas leak. Over 15,000 people have died in the years since of related diseases and hundreds of thousands of others continue to suffer from various debilitating diseases. The gas leak's impact did not end there. Children of the direct victims of that tragedy suffer from various congenital diseases. In the aftermath of the gas tragedy, a few initiatives were put in place to help the victims and their children. Among these was the setting up of six hospitals in Bhopal where victims and their children would be provided free medical treatment. It was this right that the Madhya Pradesh government sought to take away when it debarred victims' children over the age of 18 from availing free treatment. It is in support of the rights of these hapless victims that the Supreme Court has rightly intervened.



Children of victims too are entitled to free treatment.

The help that victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy received from Union Carbide or the Indian government or even the Indian public for that matter was measly to start off. Carbide's compensation was paltry, hardly enough to see the victims through a lifetime of disabilities and medical treatment. The Indian government repeatedly allowed Union Carbide and its officials to get off the hook. It is a matter of shame that the Madhya Pradesh government was attempting to cut off even the little support that has been trickling down to the victims.

Dow Chemicals, which acquired Union Carbide as a 100 per cent subsidiary in 2001, is looking to return to India. It has said that it will invest in the country only if lawsuits against it are withdrawn and it is cleared of all its legal liabilities towards the gas victims and the clean-up of Bhopal's environment. Sections in the government and industry are working overtime to enable this. The rights of the gas victims are likely to be trampled upon yet again. Civil society must stand up to defend the gas victims.