

NOTES, NEWS & COMMENTS

Toxic Chemicals—United Nations Initiative

Four weeks being about the normal 'media' half-life of a major environmental disaster, it is not surprising that in March 1987, three months after the Sandoz chemical plant in Basel, Switzerland, spilled toxic herbicides into the River Rhine, even such a striking disaster seems to have been almost forgotten, at least as an issue of international concern.

Weeks one and two after the disaster were dominated by somewhat ghoulish accounts of a red Rhine and tons of dead eels being fished out. The following fortnight produced familiar outraged cries of scandal, folly, and duplicity, followed by contrite confessions by corporate executives.

It is a pattern of horror, catharsis, and ultimate forgetfulness, that has long accompanied major environmental disasters—perhaps by way of relieving anxieties about the dangers of modern technology. If it were a process that elicited a coherent response to the dangers of toxic chemicals, all could be well. But there has been a tendency to let the issues fade before any serious effort is made to prevent such disasters from recurring.

Pattern Seemingly Changing

Recently, however, there have been fledgling signs that the pattern may be changing. For example, in response to the lethal 1984 gas-leak at Union Carbide's plant in Bhopal, India, the United States Environmental Protection Agency introduced a programme to alert communities to the presence of toxic chemicals in their areas, and to involve them in various contingency plans. How effective such a system will be remains to be seen, but the fact that it exists should provide grounds for some optimism.

Likewise, the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl has led to two international treaties on notification and assistance in case of nuclear accidents. Now at least we have a legal framework spelling out nuclear states' international obligations. But in the case of the Rhine, the international community will have to move beyond the question of compensation and the immediate problem of cleaning up the mess, and plan for the long term.

The initial response from the affected governments, industry, and the public, has been encouraging. Certainly in the Rhine basin it looks as if the inquiry that is now under way will address many of the most obvious shortcomings at Sandoz and will leave the governments better prepared than formerly. But if the Third World, where the use of chemicals has grown considerably, is to benefit, the broad implications of the European inquiry must be taken into account.

Dr Marvin Stephenson, 1935–1987

The field of resource conservation lost an ardent supporter and activist with the sudden death of Marvin Stephenson in Brig, Switzerland, on 24 January, when he was serving as Deputy Director of the Environment and Human Settlements Division, Economic Commission for Europe.

Dr Stephenson's was a strong voice in ECE's efforts in the field of low- and non-waste technology—the integrated approach to eliminating waste at the 'front end' of industrial production rather than treating wastes after generation. He had also served as acting head of other environmental programmes of ECE's Environment and Human Settlements Division, including the air pollution programme.

A native of the State of Oregon (USA), Dr Stephenson had gained his PhD in Chemical Engineering from the

Plan to Avoid Repetition

It is not enough simply to bemoan the fact that a 15-years-old law governing pollution on the Rhine proved useless. Now that the glare of publicity has dimmed, it is time for governments and international organizations to sit down with industry and make sure that mistakes are not repeated.

The participants at such meetings could reflect on the scene in Basel in the hours following the accident: government vehicles issuing warnings to the public to keep windows closed; messages broadcast in German to Italian- and Turkish-speaking families. They could reflect on incompatible alarm systems that delayed response to the emergency. They could remember the sudden realization that the Swiss authorities did not immediately know who were the responsible officials in neighbouring France and West Germany. Most of all, they should reflect upon the fact that regulations governing safety standards and industrial codes of conduct had proved ineffective.

Many of the lessons are simple enough. Contingency plans, procedures for notification, chemical identification, early assistance—these are not costly measures. Beyond them, there is a need for national regulations, particularly in setting safety standards.

Unfortunately, regulation is often used as a stick with which to beat industry. If Sandoz and, indeed, Union Carbide, had been encouraged to play a more constructive role in contingency planning, perhaps their respective disasters would have been less catastrophic. In addition, statutory regulations require a national commitment to monitoring compliance with their standards: there is no point in having fine environmental legislation if nobody accedes to it!

Progress is not simply a measure of mechanical competence: it includes an ability to formulate a coherent response to failure. It requires a package of international legislation that will organize procedures for notification and assistance in case of chemical emergency. And it should include a programme to alert local people to any toxic chemicals with which they live and to help limit the dangers that they consequently face.

The United Nations Environment Programme is proposing just such a package. The extent to which the international community, including giant industry, is willing to join in, may be the best measure of the world's ability to break out of its cycle of forgetfulness.

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University of California at Berkeley. He taught at the University of Southern California and at Michigan State University before entering into interdisciplinary work aimed at environmental conservation. After serving as an officer of the Rockefeller Foundation, he became a division director at the National Science Foundation's Research Applied to National Needs programme, until in 1981 he was named to the ECE post in Geneva. Dr Stephenson is survived by his wife, Ursula, and their daughter Lesley.

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