

February 17, 1990

West Virginia Toxic Leak Keeps 15,000 Inside

AP

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About 500 gallons of muriatic acid leaked from a hose at the plant, which is owned by both the Union Carbide Corporation and Rhone-Poulenc Inc., a French company. No injuries were reported, but fears that poisonous vapor released in the spill would spread over Institute, about eight miles west of Charleston, led officials to order people inside.

"I'm certainly concerned," said Ron Bearer, the plant manager. "This is a serious incident when we have to recommend to emergency services" that people stay inside buildings.

The vapor did not leave the plant, and the authorities lifted the order 30 minutes later.

The Coast Guard stopped traffic on the Kanawha River for 30 minutes for fear that the vapor cloud would sweep toward the river. The cloud dissipated soon after it formed.

The leak occurred as workers filled a tank at the plant's waste water and sewage treatment plant, where the muriatic acid is used as a neutralizing agent. A truck apparently ran over a hose, causing it to split open, Mr. Bearer said. Muriatic acid is a mixture of hydrochloric acid and water.

Bhopal Chemical Leak

A condensed solution of hydrochloric acid causes severe burns and permanent visual damage may occur. If inhaled it can cause choking and inflammation of the respiratory tract.

In the first leak, on Feb. 2, a small amount of methyl isocyanate escaped and injured seven workers. That is the same chemical that leaked from a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, killing 3,500 people in 1984. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a Labor Department agency, sent inspectors to the plant after the Feb. 2 leak. They were still at the plant on Thursday, and two more inspectors were dispatched to look into the muriatic acid leak, said Jack Hord, a Labor Department spokesman.

After the Bhopal leak and a series of leaks here in 1985, including one in which 135 people sought medical help, OSHA made a wall-to-wall inspection of the plant, which was then wholly owned by Union Carbide. The company was cited with 221 violations.

The plant was considered by Union Carbide to be the safest in the nation after the company spent millions of dollars improving safety systems after the 1985 leaks.