Torture me.

Do you remember the Bhopal gas disaster of 1984, when a pesticides factory run by a US multinational exploded in the sleeping night air of an Indian city?

On that single night, in just a few hours, thousands of innocent people died agonising deaths – their eyes, throats and lungs on fire – vomiting and coughing up their lives, choking and finally drowning in their own body fluids.

The streets were full of bodies. Among the dead, survivors lay or crawled, horribly injured. Many would never work again. Their health was destroyed for ever that night. Across the whole city, half a million people were injured by the poison gases.

What do you suppose the outcome should have been? Abject apologies, sincere regret? Generous compensation paid to families who had lost loved ones and breadwinners?

Wouldn't those whose health had been destroyed have received both damages and medical care? This was a huge American corporation with assets of billions.

But if you imagine that the mess has been cleared up, that the medical problems have been dealt with, that adequate compensation has been paid to the victims, you will have to think again.

Seventeen years later, virtually nothing has been done for most gas victims of Bhopal. Breathlessness, aches and pains, giddiness, stomach cramps, eye problems, headaches – these are endemic. More than 120,000 people are still critically ill, unable to work.

The company, Union Carbide, now merged with Dow Chemical, has washed its hands of the problem. In 1989 Union Carbide agreed to pay $479 million, an amount so pitifully and obviously inadequate that its share-price leapt for joy. Carbide's money provided an average $793 for each person who had been affected by the gas. In the event, most victims have received no more than $200 to $300, not even enough to buy seventeen years' worth of aspirin. Many have received nothing at all.

By contrast, when the Exxon Valdez spilled its oil on the Alaskan coast, nobody died, but Exxon paid out $5 billion. Over $500 a day was spent buying lobster to feed otters affected by the spill.

In Bhopal, half of the pregnant women who breathed the gas aborted spontaneously. Over the next few years the city experienced a rush of monstrous births. Imagine the anguish of mothers whose babies emerged as blueish gelatinous masses. Or with cancers raging behind the eyeballs or with a single cyclopean eye.

Seventeen years and new effects of the gas are still coming to light. Where should we start? Retarded growth? Menstrual chaos among girls born around the time of the gas — (some at 17 have not yet reached puberty while others have three periods a month).

It is incredible but true that the company did not clear up its site after the explosion. Documents still litter the abandoned control room. Dangerous chemicals lie heaped in the grounds. Globules of mercury lie scattered on the bare earth inside the factory.

New health problems keep arising because the groundwater near the factory is poisoned. Greenpeace and survivors' groups recently published the data. No response from the company. As ever. Nothing. Not even sorry.

Meanwhile, every month of every year, the death toll grows by another twenty dead.

Seven years ago, on the tenth anniversary of the gas disaster, it became clear that if we — not companies or governments but ordinary people — did nothing to help the victims of Bhopal then nothing would be done.

We ran an advertisement in this newspaper and with the help of *Guardian* and *Observer* readers raised enough money to buy a modest building, hire medical staff and open a free clinic. We called the clinic Sambhavna, which means 'possibility'.

Since then you have continued to support us and we have treated thousands of people. We have pioneered new treatments combining modern medicine with traditional Indian herbal remedies, yoga breathing and massage. The results have been outstanding.

Earlier this year, the clinic was awarded the Inner Peace Prize by the Governor of Madhya Pradesh, the Indian state of which Bhopal is the capital city. Unfortunately, he gave us no money. We need money more than prizes.

You have been generous, but the problem is so huge. Whatever came to us has been spent treating people. Money has often been in short supply. Not long ago our staff voted to forego three months' salary in order to pay for an urgently needed microscope.

We need to do more. To treat more people. And we can. We have good news at last.

We have obtained funding in principle for the building of a new clinic, with space to treat more people, and a garden where we can grow the medicinal plants we need. But that funding is dependent on our raising enough money to pay for the day-to-day running of the new clinic.

So we turn once again to you.

You, because friends, between these people — some of the poorest people in the world — and the abyss there's only you and us.

The poor people of Bhopal, no less than the victims of recent great catastrophes, were completely innocent. They did not ask for their lives to be ruined. They did nothing to deserve their terrible punishment.

But when they died, thousands of them in one night of horror, no crusade was launched, no rock concert was staged for their benefit, nor were songs written about freedom.

Their suffering has never stopped. They are still dying in Bhopal.

Please help us help them. Put your hand in your pocket and give as generously as you can, knowing that every pound, each penny will be put wisely and lovingly to work.

Fire a blowtorch at my eyes, pour acid down my throat. Strip the tissue from my lungs. Drown me in my own blood. Choke my baby to death in front of me. Show me her struggles as she dies. Cripple my children. Let pain be their daily and their only playmate. Spare me nothing. Wreck my health so I can no longer feed my family. Watch us starve. Say it's nothing to do with you. Don't ever say sorry. Poison our water. Cause monsters to be born among us. Make us curse God. Stunt our living children's growth. For seventeen years ignore our cries. Teach me that my rage is as useless as my tears. Prove to me beyond all doubt that there is no justice in the world. You are a wealthy American corporation and I am a gas victim of Bhopal.

A survivor's poem

~ DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF GEORGE HARRISON, A TRUE FRIEND TO THE POOR PEOPLE OF INDIA ~

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BHOPAL MEDICAL APPEAL

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