

Seeking Environmental Justice After Bhopal Tragedy

WHEN **KHADEEJA ABDULLAH** WAS STILL AN INFANT, her family experienced an environmental tragedy that is, in no small way, responsible for her being at the UCLA School of Public Health today.

Abdullah was born in 1984 in Bhopal, India, two miles from the Union Carbide factory. In the early morning hours of December 3 of that year, her family awakened to the sounds of screaming outside the house. When Abdullah's uncle went outside he saw chaos – people running in all directions as a thick, musty gas hovered over the city. Dead bodies were strewn on the streets. In one of the world's worst industrial disasters, 27 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas had been released from a holding tank that had overheated at the plant. None of the safety systems built to contain such a leak were operational. Approximately half a million people were exposed, 20,000 died and more than 120,000 continue to suffer the after-effects.

Growing up hearing firsthand accounts of all that went wrong in Bhopal during the disaster and its aftermath convinced Abdullah that she wanted to go into a career in which she could make a difference in protecting communities – particularly the less powerful – from toxic exposures. As a UCLA undergraduate she first considered going into environmental engineering, but her volunteer work at the UMMA (University Muslim Medical Association) Community Clinic – Abdullah was director of volunteers at the clinic, which provides quality health care to an underserved population in Los Angeles regardless of ability to pay – led her to decide she wanted a more direct path combining environmental science and human health.

She is currently in her second year as an M.P.H. student in the school's Industrial Hygiene Program, with plans to become an environmental scientist who works in the policy arena. Abdullah says her decision to pursue an M.P.H. was reinforced by her belief that preserving health and the environment are important from the perspective of her Muslim faith, and by her desire to promote more awareness in the Muslim community about environmental issues. "Given that much of the developing world is inhabited by Muslims, the impact that could come from these individuals realizing their responsibility from a perspective that is so dear to them – their faith – could substantially improve the fate of subsequent generations," she says.

Abdullah intends to focus in her professional pursuits on fighting for environmental justice. When she returns to Bhopal to visit relatives, she is reminded that the community has in no way returned to normal: Respiratory illnesses, poor vision, and gynecological complications, among other ailments, continue to be all too common. New mothers are found to have carcinogenic elements in their breast milk. Ground water around the plant is still contaminated with toxic chemicals. Residents have received minimal financial compensation for their hardship.

While her birthplace is among the most tragic examples, Abdullah believes many less publicized populations in Southern California and beyond need advocates as well. "There are underserved communities that are taken advantage of, even if not intentionally, through greater exposure to toxic chemicals in comparison with affluent communities," she says. "They don't have a voice. In some capacity, I would like to serve as that voice for them."

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— Khadeeja Abdullah (with her adviser Dr. William Hinds)

