

BHOPAL JUSTICE, SORT OF

Twenty-some years after one of the biggest industrial disasters in history, seven former Union Carbide executives have been sentenced to a few years in jail.

A court in central India ruled Monday that seven top executives and the company they worked for are guilty for their role in the 1984 industrial disaster that killed thousands in Bhopal, India. The leaking of poisonous gas from Union Carbide India Limited – the now-defunct local subsidiary of the American chemical company – was one of the world's worst industrial disasters. Plaintiffs had waited more than two decades for the verdict.

The convicted former employees have been sentenced to the maximum punishment allowed in the case. The judge imposed a two-year prison term and a fine of about \$2,000 each after convicting the men of negligence causing death, endangering public life and causing hurt.

While I'm happy that a handful of people will finally pay, however inadequate a price, I'm more interested in this because of the timing.

After Bhopal and a smaller-but still devastating-Union Carbide accident in West Virginia, the US passed regulations on similar volatile processes. During the 1990s, paper mills and chemical plants and oil refineries implemented new processes to make their plants safer for workers. But it didn't take long for OSHA to back off of big fines. So by the time BP's Texas City refinery disaster, some oil companies were already calculating that accidents would be less onerous than complying with the regulations passed in response to the Bhopal disaster.

The regulations passed in response to Bhopal specifically exempted drilling activities; **those** weren't the regulations BP took lightly in the lead-up to the disaster.

But the treatment of BP's violation of them at Texas City did contribute to the disaster. As bmaz has written, BP was already a corporate convict because of its past indifference to safety and regulations. Yet that didn't prevent BP from having the opportunity to gamble with the entire ecosystem of the Gulf so it could profit.

I'm glad Union Carbide execs will finally see some prison time. But it's not enough to hold executives accountable 26 years after huge disasters. We need to get more serious about holding corporations—and corporate executives—accountable for their crimes.