

“Asbestos kills, whether it’s blue, brown or white – it is deadly. Choosing between chrysotile and amphibole asbestos is like deciding between the electric chair and a lethal injection.”

Fiona Murie, BWI



Calls for the elimination of asbestos use in Vietnam were aggressively countered by industry stakeholders who maintained the substance was indispensable for the country’s development. In response to these claims, a government research program focusing on the replacement of chrysotile by para-aramid, polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) or cellulose fibers was initiated. Laboratory studies and industrial experiments established that PVA-cement roofing tile production and the transition from asbestos to non-asbestos technology were feasible.

Indonesia

In the global rankings, Indonesia is the world’s 8th largest importer, processor, consumer and exporter of asbestos and asbestos materials;⁴³ during the period 2000-2004, consumption rose by 20%. Throughout Indonesia, asbestos sheeting is readily available and, as one of the cheapest materials, remains the building product of choice for many customers. More than 7,700 workers are employed by asbestos-processing industries; one case of mesothelioma has been identified. The majority of chrysotile asbestos, which is imported from Canada, Brazil and Russia, is used in the manufacture of asbestos-cement roofing materials.⁴⁴

A well-resourced national asbestos lobby aggressively counters potential threats to the industry. In February 2006, the Fiber Cement Manufacturers Association, supported by the International Chrysotile Association and the Canadian Embassy, held a so-called “International Scientific Symposium” in Jakarta which was little more than a propaganda exercise to promote the “safe use” of chrysotile. On the cover of the symposium program the logos of the International Chrysotile Association, the Government of Canada and the Chrysotile Association were prominently displayed. An attempt to invite Australian pathologist Dr. Douglas Henderson, a leading asbestos expert and adviser to the World Trade Organization on the case Canada brought against the French asbestos ban, to speak at this meeting was rejected out of hand by the event organizers. One year on, things had improved marginally with the participation of

trade unionist Fiona Murie at a “Ban on Asbestos Panel” discussion during a National Working Meeting in Jakarta. Whilst the other speakers in this session⁴⁵ extolled the virtues of industry’s “controlled use” philosophy, Ms. Murie said:

“Since 1989, the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) has had a clear policy to actively campaign for a global ban on all kinds of asbestos, mainly used in building materials. The reason is clear – asbestos kills, whether it’s blue, brown or white – it is deadly. Choosing between chrysotile and amphibole asbestos is like deciding between the electric chair and a lethal injection...

The BWI has heard the oft-repeated ‘safe use’ refrain from so-called ‘asbestos experts,’ whose research has been commissioned by the industry or who are paid consultants to the industry; we give no credence to their spurious findings or to the propaganda which makes use of it. The BWI prefers to rely on the opinions of the independent scientific community, such as the World Health Organization, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Programme on Chemical Safety, the Collegium Ramazzini, the International Social Security Association, the International Labour Organization, the Senior Labour Inspectors’ Committee and many more independent organizations which enjoy international credibility and are not in the pay of the asbestos industry. They agree that the use of asbestos is hazardous and that the best way to protect humanity from the asbestos scourge is to ban asbestos.”

Pakistan

In Pakistan, widespread contamination by both imported and locally sourced asbestos endangers both public and occupational health.⁴⁶ A range of tests including geological, air and product sampling from various deposits, mines, mills, factories and residential areas, carried out by Geologist Dr. Noor Jehan from Peshawar University over recent years, revealed that all the samples contained:

“different types of respirable chrysotile, tremolite and anthophyllite. The exposure level was hundreds and thousands times greater than the permissible exposure limit in the indoor and outdoor environment as specified by the WHO and OSHA.”⁴⁷

Residents living in close proximity to small-scale asbestos-using production units or in typical houses containing uncoated asbestos doors, windows and sidings as well as students/teachers using asbestos tables and other furniture and patients/staff in hospitals with as-



bestos bedside tables, operating tables or corrugated sheeting are all at-risk. Consumers who use small heating plates, containing up to 80% asbestos, sold in Peshawar's main market, and industrial and mine workers also experience hazardous exposures on a regular basis. In addition to the asbestos mined in Pakistan, raw fiber from Canada and asbestos products on board end-of-life ships are imported.

Between 1995-2003, 601 cases of mesothelioma were diagnosed in the Northwest Frontier Province, of which 60% were in males (356) and 40% (245) in females.⁴⁸ According to Professor Dr. Arshad Javed, President of the Pakistan Chest Society, up to 1000 cases remain undiagnosed.⁴⁹ Despite the known health effects associated with asbestos exposure, asbestos-related diseases are not recognized by the Department of Health and hazardous exposures are not controlled by the Environmental Protection Agency in Pakistan. Even if as-

bestos were banned tomorrow, the problem of disposal would remain; there are no waste collection or disposal procedures and no dumps designated to receive asbestos waste in Pakistan.

In a letter written on March 16, 2006, the All Pakistan Federation of United Trade Unions informed the Minister for Industries and Production, Mr. Jehangir Khan Tarin, under the subject heading: "Asbestos is dangerous for human life" that:

"the scientific and medical evidence on the dangers of this building material is beyond doubt. We as a group of unions believe that this substance should be BANNED in our country. We also note that asbestos is still being widely produced and used in our industry and call on government, employers and unions to work together to switch to substitute products as a matter of urgency."

