



Cooperation Across Borders, Academic Disciplines and Cultures

The first opportunity to explore the threats posed by the increasing use of asbestos in Asia was created by international asbestos victims groups, NGOs, trade unions, government agencies and Japanese supporting bodies which worked together to organize the Global Asbestos Congress 2004 (GAC 2004) in Tokyo. This event, which brought together 800 delegates from 40 countries, addressed a range of medical, legal, epidemiological, biochemical, environmental, social and political issues. Representatives of international labor federations and hundreds of Asian trade unionists were in attendance, underlining the growing awareness of the toll being paid by building workers for hazardous asbestos exposures. The presence of Japanese, Indian, Australian, Canadian, American, Welsh and Northern Irish asbestos victims and family members personalized the growing worldwide epidemic.

GAC 2004 kick-started the regional asbestos debate and gave birth to many joint initiatives including a follow-up conference in Bangkok in July 2006 which progressed the regional asbestos dialogue. Attendance of high-level Thai politicians and civil servants at the Asian Asbestos Conference (AAC 2006) enabled Thai delegates to engage in one-to-one discussions on issues such as the lack of surveillance of working conditions in asbestos facilities located in rural areas. Dr. Ivan D. Ivanov, an Occupational Health specialist from

the WHO, called the meeting an “important milestone” in regional and global efforts to curb the epidemic of asbestos-related diseases.

By offering speakers the opportunity to present up-to-date and accurate information on the asbestos hazard, AAC 2006 succeeded in exposing industry propaganda such as reassurances that “the controlled use of asbestos is safe.” No delegate to the conference left Bangkok with any illusions about the potential for lasting harm posed by the use of asbestos and asbestos-containing products. Highlighting the importance of the conference for Thai delegates, Dr. Somkiat Siriruttanapruk, one of the conference organizers, reported that:

“Since the conference, the asbestos issue has been the focus of meetings and discussions amongst civil servants, government personnel and occupational health professionals in Thailand. We are determined to build on the momentum generated by the July meeting so that improvements will be made and the population will be better protected from the asbestos hazard. Thailand was honored to have so many distinguished international experts attend this event and we look forward to working with this global network in the future.”

Delegates at the AAC adopted *The Bangkok Declaration on the Elimination of Asbestos and Asbestos-related Disease* (Appendix D) which calls for a total abolition of the use of asbestos and asbestos-containing products, highlights the importance of primary prevention and the application of practical guidelines for good practice, points out that safer alternatives are available and should be used and emphasizes the need for early disease detection, appropriate medical treatment and prompt payment of government benefits and compensation claims.

Asian Action on Asbestos

The asbestos problem epitomizes common challenges facing Asian populations, such as the epidemic of industrial accidents and deaths and the lack of good governance. Grass-roots mobilization linked to international advocacy is critical for a “sustained and holistic improvement” for workers in the region according to Sanjiv Pandita, from the Hong-Kong based Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV) who says:



“Workers in Asia should not need to go through the same painful experience as workers in industrialized countries before a complete ban on asbestos is introduced.”

ANROAV is working to raise awareness of asbestos issues throughout Asia and has played a major part in the asbestos campaign mounted by NGOs such as BANJAN and JOSHR in Japan. Recognizing the need for practical support from medical and legal professionals and collaboration with trade union, environmental and health activists, ANROAV cultivates links through its attendance of meetings such as the GAC 2004 and the AAC 2006 and its outreach programs. To counter industry’s propaganda, it has launched an information campaign in major Asian languages about occupational and environmental asbestos hazards.

Throughout the 20th century, countries with the highest incomes were the biggest asbestos consumers; in the 21st century, the biggest consumers are middle income countries. This shifting pattern of consumption should be ringing warning bells throughout Asia. As history has shown that a national ban by one country merely relocates the problem to its neighbors, a coordinated strategy such as once proposed by Professor Ken Takahashi, from the University of Occupational and Environmental Health (Japan), is needed. To be effective, an Asian Asbestos Action Plan should include: measures for prevention of all types of asbestos exposure, simultaneous national bans to prevent the transfer of hazardous technologies and systems for monitoring actions taken and progress made.

Victims

The year 2006 was dubbed the Year of Action on Asbestos by the global ban asbestos network. During that time, the asbestos debate started in earnest in Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, India, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines and engaged with new social partners, groups and individuals in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Ja-



pan, Korea, Poland, Italy, South Africa, the UK and the U.S. In support of calls for a global ban made by trade unions in 2006, asbestos victims’ associations, community groups, international bodies and politicians from 42 countries issued a petition stating:

“we declare that each human being has the right to live and work in a healthy environment. It is not acceptable that a substance which is too harmful to be used in the European Union is used in Asia, Africa and Latin America; it is not acceptable for an industrialized country to dump asbestos-contaminated ships in a developing country... The time for action is now!”

Emphasizing the ever-expanding links of the virtual ban asbestos campaign was the agenda of a meeting held on December 3, 2006 in New Delhi by Dr. TK Joshi, Head of the (Indian) Center for Occupational & Environmental Health. The well-attended event featured presentations by key scientific and medical experts from Asia, North America and the Middle East and campaigners representing Asian asbestos victims and community groups. On May 18-19, 2007, a Korean-Japanese Symposium: *Solutions on Asbestos Issues* was held in Seoul, Korea; this event was supported by a broad range of groups representing civil society in both countries.

