

Concluding Thoughts



Differing realities can affect the feasibility of some courses of action in individual countries.⁹⁷ On the whole, however, many factors remain constant throughout Asia:

- the construction industry is notoriously dangerous and even minimal compliance with health and safety legislation is rare in most Asian countries; workers in the construction and demolition industries will continue to receive hazardous exposures as long as asbestos products are being used;
- there is an almost total lack of government surveillance of occupational conditions at asbestos-using production facilities and downstream locations such as construction sites;
- there are little or no national data on the incidence of asbestos-related diseases or mortality; the absence of data is exploited to validate the continued use of asbestos;
- compensation for victims of asbestos-related diseases is virtually non-existent;⁹⁸
- deadly economic exploitation of unskilled and uneducated workers exposed to asbestos in the informal sectors is widespread;
- the transfer of hazardous asbestos technology from developed to developing countries: the expansion of the Korean asbestos industry in the 1960s and 1970s was fuelled by investment from Japan⁹⁹ and Germany; as regulations tightened in the 1990s, Korean producers of asbestos textiles and brake linings relocated to China and other countries in Southeast Asia;
- the existence of aggressive and well-financed misinformation campaigns, using industry-funded “experts” citing “voodoo science” to mislead governments and consumers;
- a lack of political will to tackle national asbestos legacies; a typical example of this is decades of government inaction in Japan; even when governments acknowledge the asbestos hazard, there is no sense of urgency in dealing with the problems it has created;
- the lack of coordination among government agencies with, for example, the Ministries of Public Health, Labor and Environment supporting an asbestos ban and the Ministries of Industry and Natural Resource opposing it;
- asbestos-using facilities sited in densely populated areas pollute the atmosphere and put local people at risk;

- the almost total absence of provision for the controlled disposal of asbestos waste.

Variations in national economies notwithstanding, there is no level of asbestos exposure which is “safe;” the concept of the “controlled use of asbestos” is an industry fallacy designed to mislead unsuspecting governments and naïve consumers. If countries are not ready to ban asbestos and are serious about minimizing the asbestos risk to the population, they should impose the strictest controls possible; even with a Threshold Limit Value (TLV) of 0.1 f/cc, as many as 5 out of 1,000 workers will die from asbestos-related lung cancer, if the TLV is 2 f/cc, 64 out of 1,000 will die. Concerted regional action on asbestos in Asia is recommended; history has shown that unilateral asbestos bans result in hazardous technologies being dumped on the most vulnerable workers in countries with no bans.

Mr. Issei Tajima, a Member of the House of Representatives of Japan and the Secretary General of the Asbestos Task Force of the Democratic Party of Japan, urges other Asian countries not to make the same mistakes as Japan. Despite the fact that the ILO had pointed out the carcinogenicity of crocidolite as early as 1970, the Japanese Diet did not ban its use until 1995; although government negligence led to high levels of asbestos-related damage, the Japanese Government continues to prevaricate about its responsibilities, saying that it acted in accordance with the level of scientific knowledge available at the time. Mr. Tajima says:

“I have strong feelings that for other countries to delay their response in the same way as Japan, a whole host of potentially avoidable problems such as an increase in damage including pollution and panic will occur in other regions of the world. We must find a global solution to the problem of asbestos starting with a response in Asia as a whole.”

The transference of asbestos technology to industrializing countries is an imperialist act which exploits the world’s most at-risk populations. While a handful of producers reap the benefits of the commercial exploitation of asbestos, scores of countries experience far-reaching damage during each industrial phase: manufacture, demolition and disposal. Only by externalizing significant costs, such as the compensation and medical treatment of the asbestos-injured, can asbestos compete with safer materials. The continuing use of asbestos is a crime against humanity and cannot be

justified. The trans-border shipment of raw fiber, tainted products, contaminated waste materials and poisoned vessels show a contemptuous and illegal disregard for international regulatory frameworks, regional directives and national laws. When the problems which remain in the industrialized world from its asbestos past are considered, it is inexplicable that decision makers in developing countries continue to allow the use of this acknowledged toxin.

Even as the level of ban asbestos mobilization increases throughout Asia, some national governments remain unable or unwilling to impose national restrictions on the use of this hazardous substance. Nevertheless, serious efforts are being made to raise awareness amongst workers in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam by asbestos victims' groups, trade unions, medical professionals, civil servants and academics. The future holds no place for the killer dust; it is neither sustainable nor irreplaceable. As millions of global asbestos victims have learned, when it comes to asbestos the polluter rarely pays; the real costs of asbestos use are borne by individuals, families, communities and countries facing huge asbestos-related health and decontamination bills. The best way to reduce the burden of asbestos-related disease is to ban asbestos; asbestos is yesterday's material and should be relegated to the dustbin of discredited technologies and discarded materials; an asbestos-free future is possible.

