



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:

