

Hong Kong Declaration towards a Complete Ban on all forms of Asbestos

April 27, 2009

The Asian Asbestos Congress 2009 (AAC) was organised jointly by the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) and the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims (ARIAV) and supported by the Ban Asbestos Network Japan (BANJAN), Ban Asbestos Network Korea (BANKO), Building and Woodworkers International (BWI), International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) and the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV). Representatives of the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and the International Commission on Occupational Health took part in this conference. The conference was attended by more than 200 participants from 24 countries representing the Asia Pacific, Europe, North and South America.

Awareness is growing fast throughout Asia of the need to stop the use of all forms of asbestos and prevent asbestos related diseases. Grassroots action to attain these aims and achieve fair compensation for victims and their families is spreading. In recent years, mobilisation by asbestos victims groups has achieved major successes in Japan and Korea, the only two countries in the region which have banned asbestos. Working with social partners, these groups have highlighted the existence of national epidemics, raised public awareness of asbestos problems and lobbied governments to address a range of social, political and scientific issues.

Despite this progress, asbestos continues to be used in large quantities in the Asian region. Aggressive campaigns by vested interests lead by Canada, Russia and Brazil – asbestos producing countries – have increased industry's profits at the expense of hazardous exposures experienced by workers and community members. Asbestos, the largest contributor to the growing epidemic of occupational cancer, poses a major threat to public health. The majority of asbestos victims do not receive the medical treatment and compensation to which they should be entitled; indeed it is the victims who pay the price for industry's profits. The asbestos industry continues to promote discredited propaganda which alleges that certain forms of asbestos can be used safely under "controlled conditions." The only "safe use of asbestos" is no use. Safer asbestos-free alternatives exist and must be used.

A concerted effort by asbestos victims groups, trade unions, employers' organizations, researchers, lawyers, relevant agencies and grassroots groups is needed to stop the use and export of the asbestos hazard to industrially developing countries from industrialised countries like Japan or Korea where asbestos is banned. It is urgent to disseminate information about the hazards of asbestos to the grassroots, establish proper diagnostic infrastructure and promote the use of safer alternatives throughout the region.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation and the level of threat posed by the continued use of asbestos in Asia, the participants of the AAC urge governments, the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization, the International Commission on Occupational Health and other international agencies and organizations to:

- 1) Adopt an immediate and complete ban on all forms of asbestos and all processes that involve asbestos including mining, manufacturing or any other activity.
- 2) Give priority to safer alternatives and implement a logical transition to safer technologies. Workers and the community should be protected from exposure to fibres during the transitional period.
- 3) Ensure that appropriate techniques are used when asbestos removal work is carried out; in the interim, implement a labelling protocol for all asbestos contaminated structures in order to alert workmen and the community of the imminent hazard posed by this contamination.
- 4) Establish a diagnostic infrastructure so that victims can be correctly diagnosed and receive timely medical treatment and rehabilitation.
- 5) Make all efforts to develop a 'cure' for asbestos related sicknesses and diseases including mesothelioma.
- 6) Make financial restitution to victims of asbestos related illnesses by paying equitable compensation.
- 7) Hold companies involved in the transfer of asbestos production to newly industrialising countries criminally liable in the country of origin and country of operation.
- 8) Ratify the ILO convention 162 and work towards developing National Programmes for Elimination of Asbestos-Related Diseases (NPEAD) in a timely manner.
- 9) Provide help and support to reinforce the vital work of Asian asbestos victims groups in order to maximize their efforts to generate awareness about the severity of the asbestos problem.

The AAC delegates are appalled by the unconscionable misconduct of the Canadian government in continuing to fund the discredited Asbestos Institute so that it can continue its immoral propaganda and promote the export of asbestos disease to harm people in the developing world.

Recognizing the urgent need for coordinated action in Asia, a new group was launched at the conference: the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN). The formation of A-BAN is a landmark in the Asian campaign to obtain justice for the asbestos-injured and to implement a regional asbestos ban. The group which consists mainly of asbestos victims' organizations, labour unions and environmental justice groups from 16 Asian Pacific countries will work towards strengthening the grassroots Ban Asbestos movement in Asia.