

From the first moments of AAC 2009, the plight of Asia's asbestos victims took center stage. Where academic initiatives were discussed, attention focused on how the research could be of practical assistance to the injured; where asbestos abatement techniques were considered, the focus was on how they could be used to minimize hazardous expos-

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*A poignant message from Japanese asbestos victims transmitted during the welcome dinner set the tone for much of what was to follow.*

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ures. In the participatory atmosphere created by the conference organizers, experienced Japanese and Korean researchers interacted with Indonesian colleagues relatively new to the asbestos issue and grass-roots members from China with no background on asbestos whatsoever. Everyone had something vital to contribute and all opinions and experiences were given the respect they deserved. A poignant message from Japanese asbestos victims transmitted during the welcome dinner (April 25) set the tone for much of what was to follow; expressing sadness at the damage done, they urged AAC 2009 delegates to work together to end decades of asbestos slaughter. The faces of those affected in Japan and the faces of those they left behind were a salient reminder of the humanity which underpins everything the ban asbestos campaign stands for.\* The presence in Hong Kong of victims' representatives from so many countries reminded delegates that while the faces change, the heartbreak and deprivation caused by asbestos remains the same.

Since the Asian Asbestos Conference 2006 took place in Bangkok, the regional movement has been reinvigorated by an influx of members from more countries and sectors of civil society. The increasing information exchange and communication across subject disciplines and national borders has led to more joint initiatives. The energy and new skills brought to the movement by younger members has complimented the experience and knowledge of those not quite so young; working side by side towards common goals they have made substantial progress in recent years regarding the banning of asbestos and the empowering of victims in Asia. Some highlights reported to the conference include:

- Japan: victims continue to keep asbestos high on the national agenda through sustained political pressure, medical researchers and trade unionists are working together to delineate a practical approach to assist at-risk groups and new initiatives have been launched to support retired workers with asbestos-related diseases;
- Korea: campaigners have mobilized civil society around multiple asbestos issues, such as occupational

injuries, environmental pollution and contamination of consumer products and forced the government to implement a national ban and take steps to identify victims;

- The Philippines: labor federations are progressing a ban asbestos strategy which relies on political lobbying, building relationships with government agencies and the use of technology to spread awareness of the asbestos hazard;
- India: committed doctors, in cooperation with community activists, have embarked on programs to identify the injured; new outreach programs have been launched in mining and industrial areas to raise asbestos awareness; initial efforts by trade unionists to organize ship-breaking workers are showing positive results;
- Indonesia: community activists, in collaboration with Japanese and Korean colleagues, have documented the transfer of hazardous asbestos technology to Indonesia and are quantifying the asbestos risks to workers and local people in Cibinong;
- Hong Kong: a campaign by asbestos sufferers, family members and trade unionists resulted in the government adding mesothelioma to a list of compensated illnesses; projects to assist victims are providing much needed support; efforts to publicize the potential hazards of asbestos products in Hong Kong public housing continue;
- China: research has revealed that people working in or living near chrysotile-using factories on the mainland are at high risk of contracting cancer; positive results have been reported by a company developing asbestos-free building materials;
- Pakistan: At the second meeting of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Chemicals (April, 2009), a breakthrough was made with the decision to include all types of asbestos on a list of hazardous materials;
- Malaysia: A national trade union center has embarked upon a program of training, publicity and education to progress its goal of a comprehensive ban on asbestos use;
- Sri Lanka: a new law, which will come into force in 2009, will list the asbestos industry as "hazardous," mandate the reporting of asbestos-related illness and introduce stringent workplace controls in all sectors.

The work of AAC 2009 did not end when delegates left Hong Kong. Only weeks after this major event took place, a story which underlined the ubiquity of the region's challenges made headline news in South Korea. The article entitled *The Deadly Air they Breathed* [108] described the

\*This message can be viewed in a video on the World Asbestos Report homepage: <http://worldasbestosreport.org>

