

Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a remarkable transition in the public perception of asbestos. Once revered as “the world’s most wonderful mineral” asbestos is now widely regarded as a global curse – “killer dust” [3]. This change of view owes much to the commitment and efforts of asbestos victims, public health campaigners and labor activists who have worked resolutely to expose the silent epidemic of asbestos-related diseases that has blighted so many lives. Although victims’ groups had campaigned on local asbestos problems since the 1980s, the first steps towards coordinated international action were not taken until the mid-1990s. With increasing communication, the opportunities offered by the internet and the establishment of a body to monitor developments – the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat – the virtual ban asbestos citizen’s movement expanded rapidly. The movement came of age with the holding of the world’s first victim-oriented asbestos conference: the Global Asbestos Congress 2000 (GAC 2000). The congress was a concrete demonstration of the latent power of the growing network of individuals and groups that supported a universal asbestos ban and justice for the injured. In many ways, it was the acorn from which so much has grown.

It is interesting to note that amongst the 100 foreign delegates who travelled to Osasco, São Paulo to attend GAC 2000 were four from Japan and one each from Korea, and India [4]. Within four years, Asian ban asbestos mobilization had mushroomed, and as a result the second Global Asbestos Congress, which was held in Tokyo in 2004, attracted 800 delegates from 40 countries [5]. Two years later, the first asbestos conference to focus specifically on the Asian region – the Asian Asbestos Conference 2006 – brought together in Bangkok 300 delegates from Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and North America [6]. Capitalizing on the momentum achieved by these earlier events, in April this year nearly 200 delegates from 24 countries traveled to Hong Kong to attend the event which is the subject of this report (AAC 2009). The number of people involved in the above conferences and the diversity of sectors and groups they represented clearly indicate that what was once considered a radical fringe movement has most definitely entered the mainstream.

While ban asbestos activists are now invited to take part in Parliamentary panels, consult on research protocols and contribute to government decision making, once all-powerful asbestos industry representatives have been cast adrift by former supporters and beneficiaries who no longer wish to be associated with the tainted products they purvey. The outdated and compromised research that asbestos stakeholders relied on has, time and again, been revealed as biased and inaccurate. Indeed, the consensus on asbestos among all major international agencies is in total dis-

agreement with an industry still maintaining that asbestos can be used safely under “controlled conditions.” The World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the Collegium Ramazzini, the World Bank, the United Nations, the International Commission on Occupational Health, the International Trade Union Confederation, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization concur that all types of asbestos are dangerous, there is no such thing as safe use and the best way to protect humanity from hazardous exposures is to ban asbestos. The pronouncements of the asbestos lobby are now perceived to be as credible as those from the flat-earth society, another group located at the outer limits of the lunatic fringe.

The concept of AAC 2009 [7] was refined during consultation over a period of nearly two years. Careful consideration was given to the choice of venue and timing of the event. Recognizing that China is the world’s most prolific user of asbestos, and that China had been under-represented at previous meetings, it was decided to hold the conference in Hong Kong. There is little doubt that the proximity of the venue encouraged many key personnel from mainland China to attend, as did large contingents from India, Japan, Korea and Indonesia together with delegates from other Asian countries, global ban asbestos campaigners, medical experts, legal professionals, trade unionists, technicians and academics. There was provision for simultaneous translation into Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Japanese and English to facilitate the needs of the different national delegations. To emphasize the ongoing asbestos health risks faced by millions of workers in Asia, the date of the conference was set to coincide with the run-up to International Workers’ Memorial Day, when there was a demonstration of solidarity by conference delegates. Indeed, the activities on that day, which included two well-attended and colorful rallies in central Hong Kong, stand as testament to the growing strength of the ban asbestos movement in Asia.

Asbestos Consumption 2005-2007

Year	China (tonnes)	Asia (tonnes)	Global (tonnes)	Asia % of Global	China % of Global
2007	629,099	1,123,013	2,079,590	54%	30%
2006	531,190	1,283,979	2,214,068	58%	24%
2005	514,614	1,201,625	2,148,162	56%	24%
Total	1,674,903	3,608,617	6,441,820	N/A	N/A

This data has been sourced from the United States Geological Survey; <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/asbestos/> Throughout this report, discrepancies in asbestos consumption and production data are common; these differences reflect the continuing vagueness of official sources when it comes to reporting on asbestos.

In its emphasis on grass-roots concerns and broad participation, AAC 2009 was the first international asbestos conference of its kind to be held in China.* The agenda, which was developed through a participatory process, gave priority to key issues as identified by asbestos victims' groups, regional bodies, NGOs and labor federations during numerous meetings, skype conference calls and through the exchange of hundreds of emails. As the aim of the conference organizers – the Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC), the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims – was to strengthen the grass-roots ban asbestos movement in Asia, discussion time was regarded as a key agenda priority. To encourage interaction and maximize delegates' participation, informal workshops, break-out groups and discussion sessions complimented the more structured plenary sessions. Other “happenings” which took place from April 25-28, including a photographic exhibition, video screenings, trips to examine asbestos contamination of local domestic buildings, media interviews and a press conference, helped realize the organizers' vision of a multidimensional event.

It is highly significant that during the conference, representatives from international agencies tasked with protecting occupational and public health – the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization and the International Commission on Occupational Health – reiterated calls previously made by their organizations in support of a global asbestos ban; what is more, they expressed willingness to work closely with other groups, including victims' organizations, on the elimination of asbestos-related disease. On a regional level, the establishment of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN) at AAC 2009 was, according to the Hong Kong Declaration (Appendix A), “a landmark in the Asian campaign to obtain justice for the asbestos-injured and to implement a regional asbestos ban.”

The report which follows is an attempt to disseminate the important information presented in Hong Kong and convey something of the atmosphere in which the discussions took place.

* Previous meetings had been selective, open only to invited academics and industry personnel.

