

Building the Global Ban Asbestos Network

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In the presentation *Social Movements in South America: The Role Performed by Social Movements and Activists against the Asbestos Industrial Lobby* which began the penultimate session of the conference, Engineer Fernanda Giannasi put the struggle to ban asbestos within a political as well as a sociological context:

“The boom of asbestos production and use in South America coincided with a time of non-democratic governments. During the 20 years of military dictatorships in Brazil, Peru, Chile and Argentina, the use of asbestos flourished; the restoration of the democratic process marked a turning point for this industry as the use of asbestos is incompatible with democratic goals and human rights.”

In October 2005, the French Senate issued an official report which denounced the Government, the asbestos industry and trade unions for allowing the continued use of asbestos, an acknowledged carcinogen. The Senate, which described the French asbestos epidemic as the worst occupational health catastrophe of the twentieth century, accused the Government of having been anesthetized by the asbestos lobby. “It was,” said the speaker “a perfect social crime as it allowed the maximization of corporate profits and the socialization of cancer despair.”

In recent years, asbestos bans had been achieved in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, four Brazilian states and several Brazilian municipalities. In many South American countries, victims’ groups such as the Brazilian Association of the Asbestos-Exposed (ABREA) had played a prominent role in formulating national asbestos debates by positioning themselves as counterpowers to the industrial might of asbestos stakeholders [98]. Since it was founded in 1995,



Sunday in the park with ABREA

ABREA had disseminated information on asbestos risks, campaigned for local, regional and national legislation to ban asbestos, engaged in capacity building, lobbied for social protection, medical assistance and compensation for

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victims as well as the rehabilitation of damaged mining areas. It had uncovered and publicized the asbestos industry’s dirty tricks, exposed false data and lies asbestos stakeholders had used to influence public opinion, denounced noncompliance with environmental regulations and publicized health and safety infringements.

ABREA had organized 10 victims’ groups in 7 states; the membership of these groups are listed below:

- Bahia: former workers from Sama (Poçoões) and Eternit (Simões Filho);
- Rio de Janeiro: former workers from Asberit (Rio de Janeiro);
- São Paulo: former workers from Brasilit and Saint-Gobain (São Caetano do Sul), Eternit (Osasco) and Avibras (Jacareí);
- Paraná: former workers from Multilit (São José dos Pinhais);
- Goiás: former workers from Sama (Minaçu);
- Minas Gerais: former workers from Brasilit and Saint-Gobain (Contagem);
- Pernambuco: former workers from Brasilit.

The logistical and financial challenges which had been overcome were monumental; taking on a politically powerful and well-resourced industry in a country the size of Brazil had necessitated the total commitment and energy of the ABREA community as well as the support of campaigners representing other disadvantaged organized groups such as the landless, the disabled and the homeless. While the success of the Latin America Virtual Citizens’ Ban Asbestos Network could be measured in lives saved, the ineffectiveness of international agencies, the inactivity of governmental bodies and the apathy of some big non-governmental organizations remained a grave disappointment.

Dr. Annie Thébaud-Mony, the Director of Research at the French Institute of Health and Medical Research and a founding member of Ban Asbestos France, has been involved in the ban asbestos campaign for more than twenty

years as both an academic and a concerned citizen. In her paper on *The Mobilization of European Action on Asbestos: the Ban Asbestos Network*, she touched on the origins of the movement in France, early attempts at cross-border collaboration and the efforts required to move the campaign from the radical fringe to mainstream society. The evolution of the Ban Asbestos Network (BAN) was informative as it highlighted key issues such as the difficulties of pre-internet communication, the dispute which took place within the scientific community about the toxicity of asbestos, the political and economic influence of the asbestos industry and the double standards applied by multinationals to excuse dangerous operations in developing countries; it also showed the emerging power of the social forces which coalesced over the need to ban the use of asbestos and obtain justice for the injured.

In the mid-1970s, scientists at a university in Paris discovered that their experiments were being contaminated by a white dust: asbestos. The scientists made common cause with asbestos textile workers and students to protest the hazardous exposures generated by the increasing use of asbestos. French activists and academics met with a handful of other European campaigners in Strasbourg (1991 & 1992) and in Milan (1993); these meetings laid the foundation for the Ban Asbestos Network (BAN). As discussions proceeded, the deadly impact asbestos was having on populations throughout Europe became irrefutable. In 1994, BAN members participated in a seminar in São Paulo, *Asbestos: Controlled Use or Ban*, to share data and experiences; with the new members from Brazil, BAN became a global citizens' network. Since its inception, BAN had been unique; there were no premises, no hierarchy and no official representatives. The thousands of people participating in the worldwide ban asbestos community were victims, campaigners, environmentalists, trade unionists, medical specialists, concerned citizens, civil servants, journalists, lawyers and politicians.

As the campaign became a global phenomenon, it became clear that a permanent body was needed to service the needs of the movement; the International Ban Asbestos Sec-



GAC 2004: the highly effective support team

retariat was set up in 1999. Joint initiatives mounted by this network had had a major impact on the worldwide debate on banning the use of asbestos. They included the:

- Global Asbestos Congress, Osasco, Brazil 2000;
- European Asbestos Seminar, Brussels, Belgium 2001;
- Canadian Asbestos: A Global Concern, Ottawa, Canada 2003;
- Global Asbestos Congress, Tokyo, Japan 2004;
- international protests in France, Egypt and India over sending a French naval flagship, the *Clemenceau*, to India for dismantling 2005-2006.

In its pursuit of justice for the injured, BAN had supported the legal efforts of South African asbestos victims in their action against the UK company Cape Asbestos and Italian asbestos victims in their ongoing case against Swiss Eternit executives who, it is alleged, were responsible for the negligent operations of the asbestos-cement factories in Casale Monferrato and other Italian towns. Concluding her talk, the speaker called for the establishment of an International Criminal Court of Labor to ensure that those responsible for the global asbestos catastrophe were held to account. "Asbestos cases could," she concluded "become a precedent for other cases of criminal negligence arising from occupational and environmental damage done by hazardous exposures."

Speaking about the work of the *Ban Asbestos Network of Korea (BANKO)*, Yeyong Choi, a member of BANKO and the Korean Federation of the Environment Movement, said: "Although BANKO was launched only 10 months ago, it feels like 10 years have already passed. I feel as if I am running in a minefield full of asbestos bombs." His presentation began with the showing of a video shot two weeks previously at a demolition site in downtown Seoul; although the contractors said that they had "safely handled the asbestos," nobody believed them. This was the reality in Korea nowadays; even where regulations to prevent harmful exposures existed, they were not enforced.

A flow chart documenting asbestos problems in Korea indicated that as a result of asbestos mining, manufacturing, consumption and disposal which had polluted mine sites, industrial areas, local communities and the environment, all sectors of the Korean population had been exposed. Photographs shown by the speaker highlighted typical sites where pollution had been found:

- two large quarries and a residential area located near an asbestos mine [99];
- homes near a large-scale housing reconstruction project;
- residential areas in close proximity to asbestos textile factories in Busan [100];
- Samsung's Seoul headquarters, currently being renovated and decontaminated. BANKO air monitoring de-



BANKO members demonstrate with BANJAN outside Nichias premises at Oji, Japan.

tected the presence of crocidolite (blue) asbestos; subsequent measurements taken by the Ministry of Labor verified these findings. Samsung denied the contamination;

- schools and quarries polluted by tremolite asbestos [101];
- subway line 2 in the Seoul underground system which contained sprayed asbestos products.

The results of these and other exposures were predictable. Based on the amount of asbestos used, it had been estimated that as many as 35,000 Koreans could have contracted an asbestos-related cancer, and more than 9000 asbestosis, up to 2003.

BANKO members had pressed the government and public to confront the country's asbestos reality, often employing imaginative and eye-catching techniques to stimulate media interest. Demonstrations had been held in front of government buildings (2007), at the Tokyo headquarters of the Japanese asbestos multinational Nichias (2008), in the Seoul subway (2008), outside an illegal factory in Busan (2008), in downtown Seoul (2008), in Yangsan (2008) and in front of Parliament (2009). Last year BANKO participated in a public seminar in Parliament to consider a new asbestos law and continued its involvement with ongoing research to establish levels of asbestos contamination in Cibinong, Indonesia. This year BANKO members helped establish the presence of asbestos contamination in Taiwan and played a leading role in the publicity surrounding the baby powder scandal in Korea. Paying tribute to BANKO volunteers, the speaker acknowledged that the road ahead was long but that "working together like brothers and sisters can make this hard work easier and help alleviate the suffering of the victims."

Over the last five years, asbestos activism in the United States has been reinvigorated by a body, led and run by volunteers, called the Asbestos Diseases Awareness Organization (ADAO) [102]. ADAO was founded by two families affected by the fatal consequences of asbestos exposure. In

the presentation *Building a Grass-roots Asbestos Victims' Organization in North America*, Linda Reinstein, ADAO's Executive Director and Co-Founder, described the steps taken to create a body representing "the voice of the victims" which could engage constructively in the national asbestos debate; a twenty-first century communication strategy was needed to educate the public and acquaint politicians with the harsh reality faced by injured Americans in a country where the use of this acknowledged carcinogen remained legal:

"There is an art to effective messaging that makes and uses news to generate publicity. This includes press releases, newsletters, eBlasts, interviews and letters to the Editor. What happens if your message falls on deaf ears? For activists, we need to recognize the traditional media has changed. We need to use new media. It is an exciting equal-opportunity forum. Out of the new media, you can choose facebook, twitter and You Tube [103]. And it's really a level playing field. It democratizes activism. All of these outlets are very easy to use. They are dynamic, and most importantly, they are free."

The passion generated by so many personal tragedies motivated the work of thousands of ADAO members and inspired them to share resources, knowledge and experience to help others. To be effective, the work of the volunteers was coordinated as part of an overall plan with a mission

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statement, specified goals, consistent messaging, long-term relationships and innovative projects such as the ADAO's consumer product testing, ADAO T.V and National Asbestos Awareness Week [104]. Recognizing that a major change in public policy, such as the banning of asbestos, would not happen overnight required a sustainable level of activity to keep the subject on the national agenda; working with like-minded groups in the U.S. and abroad maximized effectiveness. Concluding her talk, the speaker paid tribute to those whose lives had been lost to asbestos and pledged that they would not be forgotten.

"In order to have a comprehensive ban on asbestos in Asia, grass-roots strengthening is not only essential but critical," the next speaker said at the beginning of the presentation: *Grass-roots Strengthening and Building a Grass-roots Asbestos Movement in Asia*. Director of the Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC) Sanjiv Pandita detailed recent asbestos work undertaken by the AMRC including capacity building, training with labor and community groups, the production of basic literature and posters in local Asian languages and subregional and local



Sanjiv Pandita

meetings. Expressing his frustration at the industry myths which continue to protect the image of asbestos in Asia, he said:

“It was easier for Bush to prove to the UN that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and lead a war that killed thousands than for us – even with so much damning scientific evidence from the ILO, WHO, and other reputable institutions – to get asbestos banned in Asia. I think asbestos is the real weapon of mass destruction.”

There was a disconnect between asbestos bans adopted by dozens of governments to protect human life and the escalating use of asbestos throughout Asia. Workers in the region, which accounted for the majority of annual global asbestos consumption, often experienced high levels of exposure, but because the substance “appeared” to be an innocuous white powder, and not a smelly chemical, they did not perceive it as harmful. When told of the long-term damage it could do, many Asian workers felt that the trade-off between a job today and a premature death in 20+ years, was a good deal. There was a serious lack of communication between the ban asbestos movement and the shop floor.

Where there was no diagnosis of asbestos illness, there could be no compensation. Throughout Asia, it was rare for occupational respiratory illness to be diagnosed and an asbestos-injured patient who succeeded in getting medical care was more often than not misdiagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis or some other condition due to the lack of even basic amenities like X-ray equipment and trained doctors. Just because Asian asbestos victims were not recognized did not mean there were none; their invisibility in national statistics was used by governments to justify the status quo. In 2001, China reported 12,736 fatal accidents to the ILO, which was only 12% of the ILO’s estimate; India, a country of more than one billion people, reported 222 cases, 0.55% of the ILO estimate. These numbers were nonsense, worse than that they were an insult to those who had been injured. We had to build institutions at grass-roots level, create asbestos awareness among workers and identify, empower and mobilize victims; and we

needed to do all this urgently to prevent more lives being lost. “Grass-roots [ban] asbestos organizing is essential not only for its own sake but also because asbestos epitomized bigger problems embedded in Asia,” he said.

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There was good news and bad news in the presentation **Asbestos at the Rotterdam Convention and World Bank**, by Environmental Consultant Dr. Barry Castleman. Dealing with the bad news first, the speaker said that given all that had been discovered about the asbestos hazard, it would seem logical for its use to be regulated. An international agreement – the Rotterdam Convention – existed which could mandate that exporting nations advise consumer countries of the risks involved with using hazardous substances; while this was not a ban, it would, at least, ensure that potential consumers had the information necessary to make an informed decision. That multiple attempts to place chrysotile asbestos on the Prior Informed Consent list of this Convention had been blocked illustrated the ruthless determination of asbestos-exporting countries, aided by the corruption of some asbestos-consuming countries, to continue the immoral trade in asbestos [105]. By blocking action on chrysotile, vested interests had created anarchy and confusion within the Convention which threatened to compromise its very existence. There might be a chance to change the voting rules so that a 2/3 majority would suffice instead of the current requirement for unanimous agreement.

The good news related to a new World Bank document: **Good Practice Note: Asbestos: Occupational and Community Health Issues** [106] which:

- urged avoidance of asbestos-containing materials (ACM) in new construction and new materials for renovation;
- required asbestos management plans for existing structures with in-place ACM;
- mandated that the repair or removal and disposal of existing ACM should only be performed by specially trained personnel, following host country requirements, or in their absence, internationally recognized procedures.

Although adherence to this guidance note was discretionary, advice provided by the World Bank was usually regarded as a precedent for other development banks, private banks and governments. The 17-page note explained the international consensus on phasing-out asbestos use, provided information on alternative building products and included summaries and references on best practices for asbestos abatement.