

Plenary Presentation

1.3 INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION

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(Ed. The version of this speech reproduced below was transcribed from a video recording. We had difficulty with (at least) one name. The phonetic transcription of this name is shown in grey and the proposed spelling is probably far from correct.)

Master of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Honourable Mayor of Osasco, honourable member of Parliament Gwen Mahlangu and delegates at the conference. Thank you for affording us this opportunity to address you this morning. We bring you greetings from South Africa.

Pain and suffering, dejection and despair, anger and frustration, bitterness and resentment, hopelessness and resignation, betrayal and duplicity – all of these words cannot express the range of feelings that one finds in a community ravaged by the horrors of asbestos-related illnesses. It is about time that something is done. We have suffered for too long.

I have been closely involved with asbestos victims in South Africa – more especially within the Northern Cape, which is my home. I shared the pain and the loss. I have seen families torn apart by this dreadful thing, we in South Africa call blue death, the asbestos dust. It is a debt of apartheid that we are still paying, at the cost of our lives.

The use of asbestos and the struggle for justice for those who are suffering from asbestos-related diseases is one of the most widely debated issues in the world, but nowhere has the human cost been greater than in South Africa.

Asbestos has been mined in South Africa since the 1890s. And even though the companies may have closed their operations, they have left behind a legacy of death, disease and environmental pollution. In the Northern Cape and the Northern Province crocidolite, which is blue asbestos, was the commonest type while amosite was mined in Omalanga. The conditions in the mines and mills were appalling with dust levels up to fifty times the legal level in Britain. The fundamental inequalities of South Africa's past resulted in the mining industry exploiting cheap, cheap black labour. People risked their lives in ignorance.

A certain Lucas *Mahlabo Omayanacha* was a young man in Mafefe who was fascinated by the workers in the mills disappearing behind the clouds of blue-white dust. Later he was to work in the mines and his job was to transport the caulked asbestos down the mountainside. He struggled to get the donkeys to move along with the heavy sacks of asbestos on their backs. At the end of the day both he and the donkeys were covered in a layer of asbestos fibres. He never knew of the dangers of this dust. He was never told. In June 1990 he was told he had mesothelioma. He was

compensated in the amount of 3000 rands which equates to about \$500, equal to four months' earnings and he sadly died on the 15th May 1991.

Asbestos mining companies deliberately suppressed the findings of scientific research in the 1960s indicating a high number of mesothelioma cases among people in our provinces. Instead, this dreadful cancer was passed off as tuberculosis. Like we said before, comrades and friends, people have risked their lives in ignorance adding insult to injury. Because this asbestos was never regarded as a threat, it found itself entangled beyond the mines and the mills and into the lives of our people. The roads were contaminated with asbestos, women mixed asbestos tailings and plastered their homes, bricks were filled with asbestos tailings and even the playground of the children at school was contaminated by the dumps of asbestos tailings left in the courtyards. The children competed to slide on the dumps. They thought it was fun. Later it would be their death sentence. Nobody told the people of the dangers. The mining companies, of course, were fully aware.

Environmental pollution is extensive, and not all the dumps have yet been identified. None of the asbestos mine dumps have been rehabilitated in the past. Rehabilitation is costly, as you know, and due to a lack of financial resources the process is slow. These dumps continue to poison more South Africans every year. The focus of rehabilitation is currently within the mining areas only. The mine in the town of Prieska, as you see in the photos outside, one of the central places where asbestos was mined, has long since been demolished, but the fibres still float around in its ruins in Asbestos Street. This site falls outside the mining areas. It is therefore not due to be rehabilitated any time soon. Residents breathe-in dust polluted air.

The stark reality, ladies and gentlemen, is that the current situation is unacceptable. At the same time, funding is desperately needed. There is simply not enough money to rehabilitate the dumps quickly enough to stop perhaps thousands more people dying from asbestosis. In our province alone, 42 mines and hundreds of dumps are still unrehabilitated. At the current rate it could take up to twenty years, with approximately a hundred million rands needed. For now it's a dismal picture.

However, recently, for the first time there was something to smile about in the Northern Province and the Northern Cape. The decision by the United Kingdom House of Lords to have the compensation case against the British multinational company heard in England. Just like the Brazilian asbestos victims who are suffering as a result of a French company, two British multinational corporations were responsible for much of the asbestos-related diseases in South Africa. Having the case heard in England will allow the relatives of deceased victims to claim compensation for pain. Multinationals must be brought to book. Even though the laws in Britain have changed concerning asbestos, the company continued to exploit the poor black African workers. In Britain, the company compensated its workers 50 million pounds, but not a penny to its South African workers. The compensation itself can never tell the story of the pain and the tragic loss of the people who have died – and I'd like to extend a special word of thanks to Mr Richard Meeran who was also one of the solicitors of the people who are struggling in South Africa. But to those back home we want to say 'A luta continua' [ed: the struggle continues].

In keeping with the developmental approach, the precautionary principal, and the state's policy of primary health care, the regulatory framework in South Africa must be upgraded to ensure prevention of asbestos-related diseases. The Asbestos Regulations Act of 1987 is being reviewed. The act is far behind internationally acceptable standards.

I would also like to applaud the initiatives of the honourable member Ms. Gwen Mahlangu in calling together a national asbestos summit; where all sectors of government put their heads together and critique the role of government in the process of ensuring that we, once and for all, deal with the animal called asbestos. And we would like to thank you for the role you have taken and certainly give you all our support as a province, Madam Mahlangu.

Currently, in South Africa, there are 7 manufacturing companies using approximately 20 thousand tons of asbestos a year. With the major use in building materials and pipes, in which approximately 10% asbestos is bound in a cement mix. There are alternatives to asbestos. Industry recognises that alternative fibres are available for many of the applications in which asbestos is currently used. The only disadvantage is, of course, cost. Increased costs means reduced profits. And the other equation, ladies and gentlemen – increased profits means reduced lives.

We are faced with an epidemic of asbestos disease in South Africa due to past practices. If we look at the road we have travelled so far and where we are coming from, the situation is very different. Not only is the democratic government of South Africa under an obligation to meet the needs of all the people of South Africa but, most importantly, the community has expectations and can take comfort that they will no more be victims of an unjust society. So we're looking forward to this Global Asbestos Congress, the first international event to give a voice to millions of asbestos victims across the world, and hope this means the end of despair. Together we must take courage and strength from each other, share our expertise and collectively overcome the deadly dust, we in South Africa call blue-death.

I would like to round-up and say: pain is a gift none of us really wants, but pain, more than anything else, makes us conscious of our extremities; that when we stub our toe or hit our thumb with a hammer, pain gives dimension to our bodies. It is pain that makes us realise that our fingers, hands, feet and toes are part of us, that they belong to us. Today it is pain and suffering in many parts of our world that brings us together. It is the shared pain and suffering of the extremes of humanity that can strengthen our collective identity, give us a sense of solidarity and fortify our determination to struggle on. Visit the portraits of the people of Prieska and see in them the portraits of men and women, boys and girls around the world that need to know that they are not forgotten, that they belong to a struggle to replace despair with hope, darkness with light, helplessness with victory, anxiety with peace. And, having seen the individuals in these portraits, let us renew our efforts on their behalf for care, for compensation, for justice, and for the resolution that such things must not be allowed to happen again. *Patria o muerte. Venceremos. Obrigado* [Ed: Our country or death. We will overcome. Thank you.]