

Situation and Activities of Asbestos Victims in a Developing Country: ABREA in Brazil

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Transcript of Presentation by Fernanda Giannasi

Introduction

I would like to thank the organisers for their kind invitation which has enabled me to come from so far to share with you this extraordinary event and our experiences against asbestos: the killer dust

I would like to say I shared your tears today when the Japanese asbestos victims and their relatives spoke as I share them everyday in Brazil with the Brazilian asbestos victims

Brazilian Asbestos Victims' Movement

In Brazil, we founded ABREA, our asbestos association in 1995 in Osasco, an industrial city in greater São Paulo, one of the biggest cities in Latin America.

At that moment I was unfairly transferred by the Labor Ministry from my former position to a new place in the town of Osasco where all the asbestos plants were closed. The reason for this transfer was to punish me for my work as a Labor Inspector during which time I worked continuously to ban asbestos. This was my task and has been for the last 21 years of my life.

Initially the aim of ABREA in Osasco was to find people who had worked for Eternit, the Swiss group that owned the biggest asbestos plant in the country from 1939 to 1993; during that time, Eternit exploited asbestos and Brazilian lives. We wanted to locate former asbestos workers so we could submit them for medical screening.

ABREA gave social visibility for people with asbestos-related diseases in Brazil. ABREA also started to organise information on asbestos-exposed people as we can see in one of the data sheets from a local victims' group composed of ex-workers from Saint Gobain, a French multinational operating in Brazil.

From 175 data sheets, I chose the one containing Sebastião's information. Sebastião was the leader of a local ABREA group. He had worked for Saint-Gobain for 29 years and last October he passed away from lung cancer. You will learn more about this emblematic victim next Sunday during the award ceremony during the GAC's closing

session. For every worker we prepare a data sheet like this one which contains a range of relevant information.

Brazilian Epidemiology

According to Brazilian medical literature, fewer than 100 cases of asbestos-related diseases had been reported from 1900-1998; not one of them was officially recognized by the National Safety Security Institute (INSS). The only accurate information on the incidence of asbestos-related diseases in Brazil, so far, has been compiled by ABREA. This is one of our main goals. In our initial group of 1,200 ex-workers, 60% had contracted asbestos-related diseases. Neither the Government, nor the employers followed up these ex-workers until ABREA began to do this.

Recently the Health Ministry has set up a national program for the epidemiological surveillance of asbestos-related diseases. It contains the names of all the former workers to be followed up. I sincerely hope that the government will persist in this initiative but I have some doubts. Brazil is a major asbestos producer and there is no wish to give visibility to cases of asbestos disease.

Growth of ABREA

Osasco's model of ABREA has been exported to other regions and we now have 6 active local groups in 3 States:

- Osasco (former asbestos-cement workers from Eternit)
- São Paulo (former Thermoid's autoparts ex-workers)
- Sao Caetano do Sul (former Saint-Gobain/Brasilit's ex-asbestos workers)
- Rio de Janeiro (former asbestos textile workers from Johns-Manville/Asberit/Teadit/Eternit)
- Bahia - ABEA- Simões Filho (former asbestos-cement workers from Eternit)
- Bahia - ABEA - Poções - (former asbestos mining workers from SAMA/Saint-Gobain).

In Poções, Bahia state, where Saint-Gobain's white asbestos (chrysotile) mine was operational from 1939-1967, the victims are denouncing the company's behaviour and demanding the rehabilitation of 700 hectares of damaged area which constitute an environmental and social disaster.

Compensation

After 500 lawsuits were filed against Eternit and Brasilit, subsidiaries of the French multinational Saint-Gobain, in 1996 the defendants began offering extra-judicial settlements of US\$1,700 to US\$ 5,000 plus health care/ medical assistance packages to asbestos victims. Because of the poverty of ABREA's members, around 1,500 former Eternit workers accepted these miserable settlements.

In Bahia, the compensation offered to the injured consisted mostly of watches, shoes, caps and funeral suits.

After 4 years of trying to negotiate an improvement in the extra-judicial settlements, ABREA and the prosecutors filed a class action against Eternit on behalf of 2,5000 asbestos claimants. Much to our surprise, considering our slow and corrupt judicial system, in August, 2004 the Civil Court condemned Eternit as being guilty of causing the claimants' illnesses and ordered that it compensate all 2,500 victims.

We estimate that this ruling will cost \$160 million and that the plaintiffs will receive 10 times more than the company had offered in the extra-judicial settlements.

Other ABREA Achievements

Asbestos is currently banned in 3 states: Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul and Pernambuco. Two states, São Paulo and Mato Grosso do Sul, had their laws banning asbestos overturned by the Supreme Court which declared them to be unconstitutional. Asbestos is also banned in 15 cities; there are more than 70 asbestos ban bills pending before the Chamber of Deputies. Public hearings on asbestos have been scheduled throughout the country and will go on.

Conclusion

There is no controlled use of asbestos. This is a fallacy. Asbestos has to be banned urgently to protect human beings worldwide.

Thank you.