

Towards An Asbestos Free World!

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Abstract

Although exposure to asbestos has been linked with a range of debilitating and fatal diseases, vested interests in Canada, Russia and Zimbabwe continue to maintain that asbestos can be used “safely under controlled conditions.” In 2003, Canada orchestrated opposition to a United Nations proposal to include chrysotile (white asbestos) on a list of harmful chemicals subject to international trade restrictions. On June 6, 2004, the Canadian Government reaffirmed its continuing opposition and pledged to block the listing of chrysotile at the September, 2004 meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for an Internationally Legally Binding Instrument for the Application of the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.

Despite the long-standing collusion of global asbestos producers, asbestos victims’ groups and public health campaigners have succeeded in over-turning years of industry dominance with the result that more than forty countries have banned or seriously restricted the use of asbestos. Unfortunately, as consumption in some countries has ended, in others it has increased. To prevent the transfer of “the killer dust” from the developed to the developing world, a sustained campaign to raise awareness of asbestos hazards is needed; working with international bodies such as the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the United Nations, the European Union, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the World Bank will maximize global efforts to bring to an end 100 years of asbestos deaths.

September 17, 2000 marked the relaunch of the global campaign to ban asbestos. This was the first day of the Global Asbestos Congress 2000 (GAC 2000), a unique event which brought together significant numbers of asbestos victims, public health campaigners, researchers and others whose lives had been touched by asbestos. Amongst the participants from more than 30 countries who met in Osasco, Brazil were representatives from Chile and Argentina. Within a year, both of these countries had banned asbestos as had many towns and cities throughout Brazil. The momentum generated by GAC 2000 has continued. In the last four years, Latvia, Spain, Luxembourg, Uruguay, Australia and Honduras have banned asbestos; last month (October 2004) Japan introduced stringent restrictions which will decrease national

consumption by more than 80%. The Governments of South Africa and Vietnam have announced their intentions to phase-out the use of asbestos.

Post-Osasco, control of national asbestos agendas has been wrested from industry by new groups in Canada and India. In September, 2004, the Association of Asbestos Victims of Québec (AVAQ) held a press conference to denounce the Canadian Government's political and financial support for the asbestos industry; AVAQ spokesperson Roch Lanthier condemned Canadian plans to block the listing of chrysotile as a hazardous substance under an international convention. Also in September 2004, Dr. TK Joshi and members of the Ban Asbestos Network of India (BANI) held a high profile international conference in New Delhi; two months later a second conference in New Delhi assessed current exposure levels of Indian asbestos workers. As a result of these activities, reports have begun to appear in the media which highlight the problems caused by the increasing use of asbestos in India. In Egypt, the first international conference on asbestos is scheduled to take place in December. Similar events in Argentina, Greece, Canada, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland have succeeded in raising the profile of national asbestos issues.

For decades, powerful asbestos interests have managed to sanitize the public image of asbestos by controlling media coverage. In Rochdale, England, home to the world's first large-scale asbestos processing facility, the local newspaper *never* published negative reports on asbestos. A grass-roots campaign by local people, worried about building work on a derelict asbestos site, changed that; in August 2004, the front page of the Rochdale Observer featured a striking image of a young female demonstrator wearing a white face mask. Increasing media awareness of the negative impact of the global trade in asbestos has been evinced by a number of recent TV documentaries. An Australian program, broadcast in October 2004, featured doctors from Thailand speaking about the epidemic of asbestos illness stemming from the increase in consumption of Canadian asbestos. A British documentary focused on the global trail of death left in the wake of the commercial exploitation of South African asbestos. Another exposé, due to be broadcast in France and Germany before the end of the year, will examine the hypocrisy of European companies profiting from asbestos production in Latin America long after asbestos had been banned in their home countries.

Important though they are, national bans and a change in public perception are just a start. The current situation in which some countries have bans while others do not has encouraged asbestos profiteers to target countries with few, if any, health and safety regulations; over recent years, the use of asbestos has been increasing in India,¹ Thailand and other developing countries. More needs to be done.

¹ In India, the volume of asbestos-cement sheet production is growing by 9% annually. According to an item which appeared on Business Line on October 17, 2004, entitled Ramco Industries: Buy, "The demand outlook for these sheets, which find application in cost-effective housing, industrial sheds and

Since Osasco, a concerted effort has been made to work more closely with representatives of international agencies. After years of inaction, the International Labor Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank and the United Nations are beginning to tackle the tragic consequences of one hundred years of asbestos misuse. In September 2003, delegates to the European Conference on Asbestos, a meeting endorsed by the ILO, issued the *Dresden Declaration on the Protection of Workers against Asbestos*; this document called on the ILO to:

“co-operate with other international organisations, (e.g. WHO and the World Bank) and NGOs, (e.g. IALI and ICOH²), to provide guidance and support for a well-governed process to eliminate the use of asbestos... (and expressed the conviction that the ultimate goal is a worldwide ban on asbestos production and use.”³

A few months later, the elimination of asbestos-related diseases was deemed a priority by an influential joint committee of the ILO and WHO. At an Asbestos Roundtable, organized by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)⁴ in November 2004, representatives of the ILO, WHO and the UN Environment Program considered proposals to make 2005-2006 the year of Action on Asbestos.⁵ Delegates to this meeting were told of the ILO’s plans to organize asbestos training courses for labor inspectors in 2005 and to conduct a worldwide asbestos information campaign in 2006.

Working in conjunction with the ILO, the European Commission established an Asbestos Working Group (AWG) at a meeting held in Maastricht this month (November 2004). The AWG will produce a “guide to good practice for asbestos removal, demolition of buildings and the waste disposal chain” for labor inspectors and workers “in whatever part of the world they work” and facilitate the exchange of information amongst Member States on “certification of enterprises and experience with masks.” The AWG will also devise and implement an asbestos inspection campaign in all twenty-five EU member states in 2006.

Calls for a global asbestos ban made at the World Social Forum in Brazil (2003) and India (2004) were echoed by delegates to the first-ever asbestos event at the European

warehousing, appears to be bright as it offers advantages such as relatively lower cost and properties such as lower heat conduction.”

² IALI: International Association of Labour Inspection, ICOH: International Commission on Occupational Health

³ <http://tutb.etuc.org/uk/dossiers/files/dresden-declarat.pdf>

⁴ In 2004, an ICFTU Working Party issued the following statement: “There was agreement to reiterate a clear position for a world ban of asbestos. It was recommended that Working Party members step up efforts with employers, governments (including labour, social and health ministries) and intergovernmental bodies such as the ILO and WHO to ban and regulate the uses and commercialization of asbestos and promote employment transition measures. Ratifying and implementing the ILO Asbestos Convention 162 should be a first step. It was also recommended to promote joint actions of Global Unions with the ILO and WHO Director Generals to strengthen adherence to and involvement in programmes of their respective organizations related to asbestos.”

⁵ Press release: ICFTU Sets Marker for World Asbestos Campaign. June 14, 2004.

Social Forum (2004). On October 16, 2004, delegates to the seminar: *Asbestos: Global Action Needed* held in London, approved a resolution demanding that:

“Asbestos mining, use and recycling should be banned worldwide; (and) a global plan of action for safe removal and disposal of asbestos must be devised and implemented.”

International development agencies such as the World Bank Group (WBG) are increasingly being subjected to calls to adopt a no-asbestos policy. In January 2004, the publication of *The Sourcebook for the World Bank Group* marked a significant departure with its recommendations that the International Bank for Reconstruction and the International Development Association of the WBG:

- should not finance the mining, manufacture or use of asbestos or asbestos-containing products; the rest of the WBG should follow the lead of the IFC (International Finance Corporation), which has put asbestos on its “Exclusion List.”
- should work with the rest of the UN system to foster a global ban on asbestos.⁶

The Bad News

Unfortunately, a UN proposal to include chrysotile (white asbestos) on a list of substances subject to international trade restrictions was blocked in 2003 and again in 2004 by asbestos stakeholders led by Canada. This is the only time that a substance has been rejected after being endorsed by the Interim Chemical Review Committee of the Rotterdam Convention.⁷ Clifton Curtis, Director of the conservation organization WWF, was scathing in his condemnation of this development:

“Canada and Russia’s objections to listing chrysotile asbestos are embarrassingly self-interested, protecting domestic exporters interested in seeing this dangerous chemical abroad... Chrysotile unequivocally meets the Rotterdam Convention’s requirements, and those governments opposing its listing blatantly disregarded the treaty obligations.”

Concluding Thoughts

The Citizens’ Virtual Network Against Asbestos which was born in Brazil has flourished. GAC 2004 has been a fitting tribute to the Brazilian pioneers whose dedication and hard work created the first Global Asbestos Congress. I think it is only right that as we bring GAC 2004 to a close, we pay tribute to our colleagues from the Brazilian Association of Asbestos Victims: ABREA, and spare a thought for those in

⁶ Goodland R. Sustainable Development Sourcebook for the World Bank Group’s Extractive Industries Review: Examining the Social and Environmental Impacts of Oil, Gas and Mining. January 2004:189 pages.

⁷ The Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade of the Rotterdam Convention.

Brazil and elsewhere who are no longer with us. The struggle continues or, as they say in Brazil, a luta continua.