

Efforts to Establish a System to Compensate Asbestos Victims

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Abstract

A newspaper in June 1996 reported that people who worked in the U.S. Yokosuka Naval Base were three times more likely to die from lung cancer than the rest of the nation and more prone to pneumoconiosis and bronchitis. The results came from a retrospective cohort study on the mortality of asbestos-exposed shipyard workers, led by Prof. Norio Kurumatani of Nara Prefectural Medical University.

Soon after the report, the All Japan Garrison Forces Labor Union, with cooperation from the Kanagawa Occupational Safety and Health Center, urged action from the Kanagawa Prefectural Government, then employer of the shipyard workers. As a result, the local government launched in 1997 a three-year project to inform 13,353 former workers about a Health Service Note, a certificate that offers free health checkups for retired workers by the government.

We also supported the three lawsuits filed by former U.S. naval base workers against the government. The workers have demanded compensation for lung problems contracted due to insufficient health and safety measures in the workplace. After the plaintiffs won the first lawsuit in October 2002, we demanded that the Defense Facility Administration Agency quickly compensate asbestos-related pneumoconiosis patients, better manage work conditions and adopt health and safety precautions. We pointed out that the government is not exempt from ensuring worker health and safety, even if it does not have control over the U.S. naval bases.

The Defense Facility Administration Agency said it "takes the ruling seriously." It further said it would "take concrete measures to better meet other pneumoconiosis victims' demands and the government's duty to protect employees' health and safety. The solution must be comprehensive, given previous court rulings and the possibility of former workers contracting pneumoconiosis in the future."