

ROCA - Rotterdam Convention Alliance

ROCA is an Alliance of Environmental, Labour and Health organizations around the world working to promote the full and effective implementation of the Rotterdam Convention

October 29, 2008 Update by Kathleen Ruff, Coordinator of the Rotterdam Convention Alliance, currently attending COP4 in Rome

Contrary to what is being reported in the media, the Conference here in Rome has NOT made a decision regarding the listing of chrysotile asbestos.

The situation does indeed look dire, but many countries are extremely upset at the way the implementation of the Convention is being blocked for political and commercial reasons and are determined to fight for the survival of the Convention. This includes, in particular, a whole list of countries in Africa, as well as the EU, Australia, Middle East countries.

They believe that if hazardous chemicals that meet all the criteria of the Convention for listing and that have been recommended for listing by the Convention's expert scientific body, are then blocked from being listed, what is the point of having a Convention.

After consensus was denied for the listing of chrysotile asbestos, the President of the Conference suggested that the issue of listing be delayed once again until the next COP in 2010. There was strong objection expressed to this suggestion, particularly from African countries who said that their promised right to prior informed consent was being destroyed.

Consequently, the President decided to halt the discussion of chrysotile asbestos and bring the issue back to the floor tomorrow, Wednesday.

Many Parties are very upset with the refusal of a small number of Parties (India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Vietnam, Mexico, Philippines, Ukraine) for preventing the Convention from being implemented.

Consequently the President of the Conference appointed the head of the Australian delegation to call together a group with a mandate to come back with suggested solutions to the impasse.

In addition, another group has been asked to look at the proposed solutions to the impasse that have already been put forward by the Convention Secretariat and by the Swiss delegation. Their recommendations suggest creating a system whereby the vast majority of countries who support the implementation of the Convention would move ahead and make progress in implementing the Convention, whereas those who object to the listing of a particular hazardous chemical because of political and commercial reasons would be put on another list and given an opt-out status for that chemical.

These possible solutions were proposed in ADVANCE of the Rome conference because of the fact that it was anticipated that this problem of a tiny number of parties obstructing the convention would occur.

The next hazardous pesticide that was discussed was endosulfan. Following on from the precedent of blocking listing of chrysotile asbestos, India and Pakistan blocked the listing of endosulfan.

The third hazardous substance, Tributyltin, was approved for listing in about 5 minutes. This substance has no real commercial trade and so there is no industry lobby.

Canada did not speak up at all during the discussion of listing of chrysotile asbestos. However, they did make an intervention very early regarding the possible solutions that have been submitted to all Parties by the Secretariat over the past several months in anticipation of the kind of political obstruction we are now witnessing (Options document) as well as a new document submitted by the Swiss delegation at the opening of the Conference here, which includes a number of possible ways to resolve the present impasse. Canada said it objected to all these proposed solutions and that it would be "premature" to make any changes in the Convention's process for implementation.

The industry's presence is strongly felt at the Conference. There is a glossy 30 page booklet with pictures of joyful children on an environmental green background, entitled "Chrysotile Asbestos Saves Lives".

The Russian delegate spoke up in the plenary saying there is no evidence of any connection between chrysotile asbestos and cancer and that many jobs in his country depend on chrysotile asbestos.

The WHO representative made an excellent, strong intervention stating that chrysotile asbestos is a human carcinogen, there is no safe level of exposure; that WHO convened a workshop that showed that safer substitutes are available.

She noted that the Rotterdam Convention is intended to protect human health but that it can only protect public health if chemicals that meet the criteria of the Convention are in fact put on the Convention's PIC list.

In summary, the Convention is gravely wounded but is NOT yet dead.

If Gary Lunn, Canadian Minister of Natural Resources, has sent out a press release (as I have been told by a journalist but do not know if this is correct), then he is sending out incorrect information that is not respecting the fact that the Convention Secretariat, the Convention President and a large number of Parties are working intensively and urgently to try and save the Convention and that the Parties here have NOT yet taken a final decision.