

Statement at the High-level Ministerial Segment of the Meeting of the COP4 Plenary Session October 30, 2008

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The Rotterdam Convention Alliance (ROCA) represents environmental and health groups around the world who are concerned with hazardous chemicals and pesticides.

We came to the COP with high hopes. Our hope was, as the WHO representative powerfully put it, that this Conference would put human health before trade.

The Rotterdam Convention is not a Convention to protect trade. Its mandate is to protect human health and the environment. Its mandate is to stop people from falling ill and dying unnecessarily from hazardous chemicals and pesticides. Its mandate is to empower developing countries by providing them with a legally binding right to crucial information and the right to set their own policy, as they see fit, to protect their people and their land from hazardous chemicals.

The overwhelming majority of Parties here at this Conference want to put human health before trade. They want the Convention to be implemented. They want hazardous chemicals and pesticides that have met the scientific criteria of the Convention to be put on the Convention's list.

A tiny handful of countries are blocking the will of the overwhelming majority of the Parties. They are putting trade before human health. The reasons they give are completely illogical and obstructive. They say that "more studies need to be done", trying to deny the reality that the Convention's expert scientific body has completed the scientific process of the Convention and rendered its recommendation.

The tactic of manufacturing doubt and delay is a well-known and dishonourable way to destroy a Convention. It is a tactic that the tobacco industry employed for many decades, using industry-funded research to deny the clear science on the harm of tobacco. Millions are dying unnecessarily from tobacco-caused disease because of that delay, just as many people will die unnecessarily because of the delay that has been manufactured here at this Conference.

Delay is a victory for those who do not wish the Convention's provisions to be implemented.

We are now at the political process, not the scientific process.

A small number of countries are holding the Convention hostage by refusing to work towards consensus. They are using the requirement to achieve consensus not as a way to co-operate but as a weapon to sabotage the Convention.

These few countries are violating everything the Convention stands for. They are betraying the legal and moral commitments they made when they ratified the Convention.

- They are putting commercial interests ahead of health and the environment.
- They are denying other countries their right to be informed about specific hazardous chemicals that meet the Convention's criteria.
- They are disempowering developing countries by refusing to let them decide the terms under which they wish to receive these hazardous chemicals.
- They are reinforcing global inequality whereby wealthy countries already enjoy the right to be informed about hazardous chemicals and control their use, whereas people in poor countries do not enjoy that right and consequently their people are exposed, unnecessarily, to harm from hazardous chemicals.

This is a global scandal and a global injustice. A few countries are killing a basic human right promised by this Convention. In order to protect the industry that produces a particular hazardous chemical, they are preventing the chemical from being listed under the Convention.

Those few countries who are blocking the listing of chrysotile asbestos and endosulfan are blocking the clear will of the community of nations. We call on those countries to stop and think what you are doing. You are blocking a basic human right: the right to information. How can anyone possibly justify blocking this basic human right?

You are blocking the right for countries, especially developing countries, to control their borders. You are blocking their right to take decisions regarding import of hazardous chemicals that they think is in their best interests.

We have heard here at this Conference the voices of a great many countries in Africa say that the right to prior informed consent over chrysotile asbestos and endosulfan is a right they need, a right they want and a right they are entitled to.

For the tiny handful of countries who are obstructing the Convention, you have the right to do whatever you wish for your own country, to make your own decisions to export or import these substances. But what gives you the right to deny other countries the right to take their own decisions?

We are seeing the Convention in danger of becoming a farce. Hazardous pesticides and chemicals that are no longer traded will get listed. Pesticides and chemicals that are commercially valuable will not be listed, even though they are so deadly industrialized countries have banned or severely restricted them.

The interest of the chrysotile asbestos and endosulfan industries are represented here at the Conference. They argue for continued uncontrolled trade of their products without any prior informed consent requirement. These vested interests must not succeed in blocking the Convention.

Haven't we seen enough disasters from uncontrolled trade of hazardous chemicals? Haven't we seen enough deaths? Isn't it time to put public health and the environment first?

It is particularly offensive to see wealthy western countries, such as my own, where we have the advantage of abundant scientific and other resources, where we have the right to prior informed consent for ourselves, where we have the necessary information and infrastructure to control the import of hazardous chemicals, where we can therefore protect the health of our own citizens, then turn around and deny this basic human right of prior informed consent to developing countries who do not have these same resources.

This is not only grossly hypocritical, it is simply shameful.

A World Call of Conscience has been signed by a large number of leading, prestigious health professionals and scientists from around the world, calling on Parties to respect the commitment they made when they ratified the Convention.

The Rotterdam Convention is in grave danger of suffering a devastating blow here. But it is not too late. There is still time to make this Conference a success for public health and the environment.

For that handful of countries who are destroying the Convention, we, the voice of the world's environmental and health organizations, say: Stop defending industry. Honour your commitment under the Convention to put human health first.