

Media Information

‘Lao Government Ministries and civil society hear from international and national experts on looming health cancer spikes to be expected from current asbestos consumption.

Pledge to develop National Action Plan to Eliminate ARD and recommend establishment of high Level Government Taskforce to coordinate planning for a ban on asbestos in Lao PDR ’

Vientiane Lao PDR

18th July 2017

Forty participants from a range of Ministries, the trade union and civil society organisations participated yesterday in an important workshop on cancer risks from asbestos and the need for action in Lao PDR.

The workshop heard that there are currently 16 asbestos roof-sheet factories established and more factories may be planned in Laos. Lao has been importing 8000- 9000 tons annually in recent years, exposing thousands of young workers and surrounding communities to asbestos exposure and therefore future cancer risks.

In disturbing new analysis it was also reported by Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU) that Laos was in fact the highest per head consumer of asbestos in Asia in 2013 at 1.2 kgs/head.

Hosted by the LFTU and Ministry of Health and supported by Union Aid Abroad APHEDA, the Australian government and a wide range of international organisations from Australia, Asia, North America and Europe, the workshop brought international experts from around the world to Laos, to provide clear evidenced based understanding on asbestos related diseases and the need for action in Lao to ban asbestos as soon as possible.

Experts include Mr Peter Tighe CEO of the Australian government’s Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) and ASEA Director Nick Miller, Professor Yv Bonnier Viger from the Faculty of Medicine of Laval University and Regional Public Health Director for Gaspésie-les-Îles, in Quebec, Canada, Mr Sugio Furuya, General Secretary, Japan International Center for Occupational Safety and Health (JICOSH) and Phillip Hazelton Coordinator Program to Eliminate Asbestos related diseases Union Aid Abroad APHEDA. Dr Rokho Kim from the World Health Organisation Office Manila Philippines, also provided a video presentation.

The workshop was supported by the Australian government through the Foreign Affairs Department (DFAT), the Australian Government Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) and a range of international organisations including Right On Canada, International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), Asia Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN), Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and Solidar Suisse.

Mr Phillip Hazelton stated:

‘We hope the workshop has clarified the serious risk to people’s health of continued use of asbestos in Lao PDR. It is deeply worrying that Lao is the highest per head consumer of chrysotile and suggests the

likelihood of hundreds of future cancers per year in the country. The risk is highest particularly for workers in roof sheet factories and those communities living around these factories.

We urge Lao to ban the use and import of this material as soon as possible. We congratulate LFTU for working hard in recent years to provide safety information to those most at risk and for the very positive response from a range of Ministries to take action. We also pledge to continue support to LFTU and key Ministries in designing and implementing an action plan to eliminate asbestos related diseases in Lao PDR.' he said.

The workshop was co-chaired by Vice Minister, Ministry of Health and Vice President LFTU and opened also by Australian Embassy First Secretary. In the meeting both Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare indicated strong interest in moving forward with the development of a National Action Plan to Eliminate ARD as soon as possible. This will build on the National Asbestos Profile recently completed and awaiting release. The LFTU Vice President, Mr Simoune Ounlsay called for quick action to move to a ban on asbestos to protect workers and community from asbestos hazards.

Peter Tighe CEO of ASEA explained the importance of Lao PDR acting to limit health impacts to workers and the community and costs for government of continuing to allow asbestos products.

'Australia is now suffering from the enormous health, economic and environmental cost of our past use of asbestos. We are here in Lao to share lessons learnt from Australia and good practice responses to the problem, to help Lao develop its own policy to save lives and costs in the future.

Australia banned asbestos and asbestos containing materials (ACM's) in 2003 and yet we are still suffering from an estimated 4000 deaths per year from asbestos related diseases. Australia has set up a stand-alone agency, ASEA, to work on coordination of eradication of asbestos from buildings in Australia and to coordinate managing existing asbestos risks. Given our deadly experience with asbestos, the Australian Government has prioritized our agency to work towards a global ban of asbestos'.

Australian Embassy First Secretary Ms Clemency Oliphant reported the high cost to the government of removal of chrysotile from affected buildings in Australia's capital, Canberra. The cost for buying back and demolition 1100 homes that had asbestos foam insulation will be one billion Australian dollars she said.

Mr. Sugio Furuya stressed that Japan failed to act quickly enough towards banning asbestos, waiting until an asbestos epidemic became visible. Japan has introduced a ban on asbestos in 2004. As a result of the delay, thousands are now being killed due to the past exposure to asbestos.

"In 2001, the verdict of the World Trade Organization has confirmed "the right of member states to prohibit the import and use of materials containing carcinogenic substances such as chrysotile ..." and "that chrysotile is an established carcinogenic, there is no safe threshold and controlled use is not an effective alternative to the national prohibition" he said.

Prof. Yv Bonnier Viger said Canadian experience was timely in the region as Canada has also recently joined many other countries in announcing a ban on asbestos. 'Currently most countries in the world either don't use asbestos or have formally banned it. That's around 124 countries. Only 25 countries still use more than 1,000 tons per year. I am very pleased to say Canada has moved from being the main

producer of asbestos fifty years ago to now fully banning asbestos in 2018. All those countries ban or don't use for a simple reason. This is because of the cancer risks from exposure to this fiber and the readily available substitutes of similar quality and price' he said.

Further Information:

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