

THE GLOBAL CAMPAIGN TO BAN ASBESTOS 2017!

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The global asbestos war is now being fought on two fronts: countries where asbestos has been banned and those in which consumption remains legal. In most of the former, the only permitted handling of asbestos is by highly protected and trained technicians during asbestos removal operations while in the latter, asbestos is regarded as just another raw material with few if any regulations to protect workers, members of the public, consumers or others from toxic exposures.

As of today, 58 countries have outlawed the use of asbestos. On December 15, 2016, Science Minister Kirsty Duncan announced that Canada would ban asbestos by 2018. The fact that Canada, one-time leader in the production of chrysotile (white) asbestos, has taken this step is the latest victory for the global campaign to ban asbestos.² The significance of Canada's U-turn is enormous as it was the Canadian Government which brought a case against the French asbestos ban to the World Trade Organization, Canadian politicians who led the veto of United Nations actions to regulate the global asbestos trade and Canadian stakeholders who orchestrated global pro-asbestos marketing initiatives. The good news is that Canada will no longer promote the interests of this deadly industry; the bad news is that other vested interests, led by lobbyists in Russia and Kazakhstan, will. After all, the annual global asbestos trade is worth billions of Russian roubles, Kazakhstani tenge and Brazilian reals.

According to the latest asbestos trade data, in 2015:

- four countries produced asbestos: Russia (1,100,000 tonnes/t), China (400,000t), Kazakhstan (215,000t) and Brazil (311,000t);
- only 28 countries (~15%) consumed over 500t/year; of these, only five used over 100,000t/year; Russia (572,848 t), China (477,264t) India (318,262t), Brazil (204,216t) and Indonesia (131,622 t);
- India is the world's biggest asbestos importer with an annual average consumption between 2012 and 2015 of ~375,000t.

Wherever asbestos has been used people die. Data published last year (2016) by Dr. Jukka Takala, formerly Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, estimated that more than 300,000 people die from asbestos-related diseases in countries around the world every year. Asbestos propagandists say that asbestos can be used safely under controlled conditions. International agencies agree that the best way to reduce asbestos-related injuries and death is to eliminate all asbestos use.

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² According to data from the United States Geological Survey, from 1879 to 2013, Canadian asbestos production was sixty-three million tonnes; the majority of Canadian chrysotile was exported earning the country billions of dollars in foreign exchange.

Global Campaign for Asbestos Justice

The global movement to ban asbestos and obtain justice for the injured has given visibility to a problem not mentioned on the balance sheets of asbestos companies: the human cost of asbestos. Proactive initiatives, pioneering media campaigns and innovative strategies have been used by asbestos victims, non-governmental organizations and campaigning groups to wrest control of the asbestos debate away from vested interests, and allow new voices to be heard. The following examples showcase the collaborative, innovative and effective techniques pioneered by campaigners in countries on the asbestos frontline.

Bangladesh

Obsolete vessels go to Bangladesh and other Asian countries to die. They are dismantled on the beach by barefoot workers using their hands and the most primitive of tools. There are no safety precautions in place and the workforce is exposed to a cocktail of dangerous chemicals and substances including asbestos.

From June 15 until July 30, 2016, the Bangladesh Occupational Safety Health and Environment Foundation held a diagnosis camp for ship-breaking workers at its Workers' Health Clinic in Shitakunda, Chittagong. The objective was to examine 100 workers from various yards. X-rays were taken and health check-ups were carried out by medical staff to identify people with asbestos-related diseases. Support workers are now helping those diagnosed access medical care and claim compensation from respective yard owners and/or others responsible for toxic workplace exposures.

India

On September 24-25, 2016, a workshop entitled The Elimination of Asbestos-Related Diseases was held during the 3rd International Conference on Occupational and Environmental Health in New Delhi, India. This session, which was organized by Asian grassroots groups, considered strategies for reducing regional asbestos consumption, obtaining justice for the injured and promoting the use of safer alternatives.

Brazil

From October 5 to 8, 2016, a series of asbestos events took place in Campinas, Brazil; they included a medical workshop, a two-day conference Asbestos: A Socio-Legal Approach and the First National Meeting of Asbestos Victims and their Families. The costs for the activities were paid for by fines recovered from the last two cement companies still using asbestos in São Paulo State. There is a delicious irony in the fact that Brazilian asbestos companies paid for events during which strategies were progressed for increasing ban asbestos mobilization throughout the country.

Indonesia

In November, the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN), in collaboration with partnering organizations, held the Southeast Asia Ban Asbestos (SEA-BAN) conference in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. The conference provided delegates from Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Japan and Australia with the opportunity to:

- consider aggressive measures taken by the chrysotile (white) asbestos lobby to increase sales to Southeast Asia;
- receive updated and independent information on the asbestos hazard;
- develop strategies for building grassroots support for national and regional bans;
- endorse a resolution expressing unity in the fight to ban asbestos and remove all the deadly products containing it from the workplace, the built environment and the community.

Through dramatic performances, lectures and discussions vital information was exchanged and future plans devised which will empower victims and campaigners.

Ban Countries

The activities mounted by grassroots colleagues in countries where the use of asbestos remains a part of everyday life underline the broad-based coalition which supports the campaign for an asbestos-free world. Battles for asbestos justice are also being fought in countries which have banned asbestos. As Japanese citizens know, banning asbestos is just the first step in a very long process. With the use of almost 10 million tonnes of asbestos in Japan,³ your national infrastructure, like ours in the UK, is badly contaminated.

South Africa

On June 16, 2016 – South Africa’s Youth Day – pupils and staff from six schools in South Africa’s former asbestos heartland took part in an asbestos awareness workshop organized by the Asbestos Interest Group, a non-profit organization based in Kuruman, the site of several derelict asbestos mines. Participants were educated about the nature of asbestos, the threat posed by hazardous exposures and the need for action to protect the community. Feedback from participants has been positive and children enjoyed meeting up and working with pupils from other schools to learn about the impact of asbestos contamination on their towns.

UK

In the UK our use of asbestos (around 7 million tonnes) produced the country’s worst epidemic of occupational disease and death. Annually, nearly three times as many Britons die from asbestos-related diseases as from road traffic accidents.⁴ Between 2011 and 2013, 7,398 Britons died from mesothelioma with an equal number of lives lost to asbestos-related lung cancer and asbestosis.

Throughout the country, asbestos victims’ groups work diligently to support the injured, disseminate information about the asbestos hazard and lobby for more research funds, better medical treatment and decontamination of the infrastructure. On July 1, 2016, events were

³ National Asbestos Profile of Japan. “The total amount of raw asbestos imported in the interval 1930-2005 was 9,879,865 tonnes.” For a limited time during the 10th century, companies in Japan produced asbestos from 31 mines around the country.

⁴ Using data retrieved from HSE online resources, it was calculated that asbestos-related deaths in 2013 could reach 5,000 [this does not include deaths from cancers of the larynx or ovary]. In 2013, there were 1,730 road accident fatalities.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/255125/road-accidents-and-safety-quarterly-estimates-q2-2013.pdf

held in Glasgow, the Isle of Man, Derby, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Birmingham, Portsmouth, Leeds, Swansea and London to commemorate the 11th national Action Mesothelioma Day and to raise public awareness of the private tragedies befalling so many families.

Italy

On September 10, 2016, a public park called EterNOT Park was opened on the site of the infamous Eternit asbestos factory in the Italian town of Casale Monferrato. Floral tributes from around the world were displayed at a public meeting at the town hall which started off the day's activities. These arrangements were a manifestation of the ties which bind the international citizens' ban asbestos network and our solidarity with all those whose lives have been devastated by asbestos.

Korea

In December 2016 and January 2017, the Ban Asbestos Network of Korea (BANKO) held ban asbestos protests outside of the Seoul embassies of the four asbestos-producing countries. These colourful events were reported in Korea, Kazakhstan and Brazil. At press conferences held before each event, BANKO representatives called for an end to the deadly mining, consumption and export of asbestos.

Industry Offensive: Deny, Decry and Spy

From the earliest beginnings, the asbestos industry has pursued a ruthless agenda aimed at maximizing profits and crushing opposition. Despite all that is known about the proven links between asbestos exposures and premature deaths and disease, industry stakeholders remain determined to continue business as usual. Some of the tactics they use are illegal, all are amoral and unjust.

The asbestos industry has bribed,⁵ vilified and intimidated its critics. Individuals linked to vested interests have issued lawsuits against campaigners in Brazil, India, the UK and France; they have used legal firms to threaten a trade union campaigner in Switzerland and authors of publications critical of the industry in the UK and Italy.⁶ Decision makers at international agencies and civil servants have been targeted and/or threatened by industry bullies and ban asbestos campaigners, including myself, Sugio Furuya, Dr. Barry Castleman, have been denounced by speakers representing Russian asbestos interests at public meetings in Korea and Switzerland and maligned via the internet. With a treasure chest of asbestos dollars at their disposal, the industry has corrupted the scientific process by commissioning research to "prove" that "chrysotile asbestos can be used safely".⁷

Using public relation firms and intelligence agencies, the industry has spied on asbestos victims, victims' groups and ban asbestos campaigners.⁸ During the 1990s, the Swiss Eternit

⁵ McCulloch J. *Saving the Asbestos Industry, 1960 to 2006*. 2006.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1564458/>

⁶ Kazan-Allen L. *Asbestos Industry Offensive*. January 29, 2011
<http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-asbestos-industry-offensive.php>

⁷ International Chrysotile Association. *The ICA President sets the Record Straight*. December 20, 2106.
http://www.chrysotileassociation.com/en/news/n_list.php

⁸ Kazan-Allen L. *Poisoning for Profit*. January 16, 2017.

Asbestos Group, as part of a multi-faceted and long-standing operation to monitor the plans, strategies and moods of campaigners in the Italian town of Casale Monferrato, employed undercover agents to infiltrate meetings of the group and report back.⁹ These activities were discovered after a police raid on the offices of a public relations company in Milan some years ago. Four months ago (in September 2016), I received a telephone call informing me that a person I had known and trusted for over four years was not the documentary film-maker he purported to be but a paid agent working on behalf of a British intelligence agency K2 to spy on me, the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat and the people with whom we worked in the UK and abroad. This man received over £460,000 [¥ 65,241,110] in wages and expenses for his efforts. He travelled widely throughout the UK and to Belgium, Switzerland, France, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Canada and the U.S. A civil case has been brought against the spy, his boss at the intelligence agency and the agency itself.

Concluding Thoughts

In the face of ruthless and powerful asbestos interests, the campaign to outlaw asbestos use is growing in strength and scope. The ingenuity, panache and enthusiasm of global ban asbestos campaigners more than make up for our lack of financial resources. Let the asbestos profiteers be warned. Ours is a legitimate, grassroots campaign supported by thousands of individuals around the world. Poisoning for profits is reprehensible, unethical and indefensible. Industry stakeholders can no longer hide behind their wealth or positions; you cannot silence those who have stared death in the face as they watched loved ones die excruciating deaths from asbestos cancer. Ban asbestos campaigners will not be bullied or deterred from their efforts to make the world a safer place. An asbestos-free future is possible!

<http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-poisoning-for-profit.php>

⁹ McCulloch J. *Saving the Asbestos Industry, 1960 to 2006*. 2006.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1564458/>