

GLOBAL CAMPAIGN TO BAN ASBESTOS 2011

Laurie Kazan-Allen

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“It is my aspiration that health will finally be seen not as a blessing to be wished for, but as a human right to be fought for,” wrote Former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. For more than 20 years international campaigners have been battling to obtain justice for asbestos victims and ban the use of asbestos. Whereas once upon a time our activities took place at the outer fringes of society, today our concerns are part of national dialogues on human rights, environmental justice, corporate accountability and sustainable development. Our efforts have helped visualize the silent epidemic that is spreading from industrialized to developing countries; a cataclysmic disaster caused by the ruthless profiteering of asbestos stakeholders.

Since we met a year ago in Indonesia, our network has been proactive in challenging asbestos lobbyists in major producing and consuming nations. We have engaged in outreach work to identify the injured, mounted legal challenges in new jurisdictions, confronted industry propagandists in asbestos heartlands and pioneered initiatives to raise public and professional awareness of the asbestos hazard. That the diverse and full agenda of activities undertaken has been conducted by grassroots activists with few financial resources is testament to their ingenuity, ability and commitment.

December 2010 – Canada

For decades, the Canadian asbestos lobby has orchestrated a worldwide campaign to promote asbestos sales, discredit opponents and prevent restrictions on asbestos sales. Even as Canadian politicians claim the high ground for their supposedly “green credentials,” they have pledged a \$58 million loan guarantee to develop new asbestos mining resources in Quebec. The ABAN Mission to Canada December 2010 and the accompanying demonstrations in eight cities around the world marked a watershed in the global campaign to ban asbestos. For the first time, representatives of asbestos consuming countries confronted asbestos stakeholders on their home ground.

January 2011 – Brazil

Traditionally, one of the key arguments of asbestos vested interests has been that shutting down asbestos industries will devastate national economies. A paper entitled: *The Economic Impact of the Banning of the Use of Asbestos in Brazil* exploded the financial justification for continuing asbestos exploitation in Brazil. The researchers concluded that the negative effect of banning asbestos “will be felt only in the sphere of asbestos extraction (which in 2007 employed 156 workers in mining and 210 in primary processing.) The problems here can be dealt with through policies of support to the affected region (tourism, for example, can become a promising alternative for Minaçu).”

Neither the Brazilian economy nor Brazilian citizens need asbestos. Since that paper was published a fifth Brazilian state – Mato Grosso – has banned asbestos.

February 2011 – the Balkans

It is often overlooked that two of the world's biggest asbestos producers are in Europe. The continued exploitation of commercial and political ties amongst East European countries ensures that asbestos is still widely used in the Balkans. News of a research project in Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was released in February which documented attempts by civil society to address national asbestos legacies, raise awareness of the asbestos hazard and build capacity amongst professionals and members of the public with the ultimate aim of banning asbestos. A 23 second clip was broadcast on blip TV as part of the NoForAsbestos Campaign;¹ one week earlier two programs detailing the asbestos hazards in the Balkans had been broadcast as part of a joint European Union-West Balkan initiative called the KAPAZ Project which spearheaded research and discussions on asbestos in Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, mounted a regional meeting, generated public awareness literature and broadcast material and established a web presence.

March 2011 – India

Events in India evidenced the fruitful collaboration of civil society partners including grassroots activists, academics and medical professionals. The visit of Professor Annie Thebaud-Mony was a catalyst for a series of events and meetings organized by the Occupational Health and Safety Centre and the People's Training Research Centre in Mumbai and Ahmedabad during which the daily reality of India's asbestos victims was discussed and plans for initiatives to quantify the human impact of asbestos consumption in India were progressed.

April 2011 – Italy

To mark International Workers Memorial Day a series of event was held in Casale Monferrato, a town decimated by decades of asbestos-cement production. At a conference entitled *A World Without Asbestos* and in satellite events held in the following days, attention was focused on the ongoing trial in Turin of former Eternit executives who are facing charges for their role in creating the epidemic which has taken thousands of lives in Casale and surrounding towns.

May 2011 – Kyrgyzstan

As recently as 2008, annual asbestos consumption in Kyrgyzstan was 20,862 tonnes; although usage fell to 6,813 tonnes in 2010 the Kyrgyzstan Government's pro-asbestos policy remains a reflection of Russia's. It was therefore highly significant that in May, an international conference *Asbestos – Policies and Practices in Kyrgyzstan and International Chemicals Policy* was held in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Despite

¹ Video clip <http://blip.tv/noforasbestos/no-for-asbestos-4678668>

disruptions by members of the asbestos lobbying group, the International Alliance of Chrysotile Trade Unions, informative presentations describing the disastrous consequences of asbestos exposure were given by eminent experts.

June 2011 – Switzerland

Canadian asbestos stakeholders continued to block efforts to impose a modicum of control on the global asbestos trade during this year's meeting of the Rotterdam Convention. After objections to regulating chrysotile exports by four countries had been resolved, Canada continued its opposition to UN proposals to protect public and occupational health. The Canadian delegate would not explain or discuss Canada's veto saying only:

“Canada is not in a position to support the listing of chrysotile in Annex 3. Canada is unable to join the consensus.”

July 2011 – Indonesia

After months of preparation, the Asbestos Danger Media Competition was held in West Java. 25 groups of participants from 15 local schools in Bandung Raya took part in the activities. The contest was organized by Ina-Ban and the Indonesian Red Cross-West Bandung. Less than two months later, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of a West Java district announced it was banning future asbestos industrialization; permits needed for the construction and operation of asbestos manufacturing facilities would, the EPA said, no longer be granted in Purwakarta Regency due to concern about the "dangers of the use of asbestos in everyday life" and the hazard presented by the disposal of asbestos waste.

August 2011 – Bangladesh

The report Asbestos Time Bomb in Bangladesh was launched in Dhaka at a “National Consultation Meeting on Asbestos.” The research undertaken by the Bangladesh Occupational Health, Safety and Environmental Foundation for this publication highlights the urgent need for civil society to take concerted action to address the asbestos threat to public and occupational health.

September 2011 – Korea

Extensive asbestos contamination of Korean baseball stadiums was revealed by The Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health which had done environmental sampling at 5 baseball parks. This situation was front page news both in and outside of Korea as it highlighted the risk posed not only to baseball players and coaches but also to umpires, stadium staff and fans who visited polluted venues.

October 2011 – Belgium

Eleven years after her death from mesothelioma, the family of Françoise Jonckheere witnessed the beginning of a landmark trial in Brussels when the case against Eternit, one of the world's biggest asbestos conglomerates, began. This is the first civil case brought on behalf of a Belgian who, as a result of environmental exposure to asbestos, contracted an asbestos-related disease. A google search last week for the name of Françoise Jonckheere produced nearly 100 articles in French, Flemish and Portuguese. The torrent of media coverage which accompanied this trial is a clear indication that the years of media censorship of the asbestos debate in Belgium are long over.

November 2011 – Australia

A program shown on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation entitled *India: Toxic Trade* on November 8 confirmed the asbestos catastrophe unfolding throughout India. The inclusion of footage documenting the environmental asbestos disaster in the small Rajasthan village of Roro substantiated the public health threat posed by asbestos.² The timing of this broadcast shortly before the ABAN meeting took place in Jaipur (Rajasthan) is a fitting reminder of the multiple facets of the challenge facing India posed by the continuing exploitation of chrysotile asbestos.

IBAS Activities 2010-2013

The roundup of asbestos developments for 2010-11 is evidence of the incredible work being undertaken by grassroots campaigners all over the world who are pursuing political, legal, educational, judicial, legislative and medical pathways to expose national asbestos scandals and generate support for victims. This year has been an incredibly productive one and I would urge people interested in more detail about developments to consult the website of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), the “go-to” site for english language news about civil society's fightback against asbestos.

IBAS not only reports asbestos news but takes an active part in collaborating with groups active in the global ban asbestos campaign. In 2010-2011 IBAS supported pioneering outreach projects, medical initiatives and asbestos campaigns in: Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, India [Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat], Indonesia, Eastern Europe, the Philippines and the UK. IBAS research this year has exposed asbestos scandals in: Canada, Italy, Mexico, Russia and the US. IBAS collaboration with documentary filmmakers and journalists has facilitated media projects spotlighting the asbestos hazard in: Australia, Canada, India, Italy, Denmark, and Sweden. Throughout the year, IBAS has worked closely with members of the ABAN network. We are pleased to once again be a major donor to the ABAN annual meeting and have great hopes that the sessions in Jaipur will be both informative as well as productive.

As for the future, IBAS is progressing plans with international agencies, global labor federations and victims groups for asbestos meetings and projects in Europe, Latin America and Asia in 2012-2013. High-profile events being discussed will reinforce work being done on regional and national levels such as the development of national asbestos

² <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/>

programs but also address the needs of asbestos victims and support the efforts of grassroots activists. In countries where government policies continue to block progress, work will continue with our social partners. Ideas under consideration vary in size, scope and region but taken together they constitute a formidable and ambitious agenda. In light of current difficulties shared by global economies, it may seem a strange time to begin work on such complex and costly undertakings. Gandhi said:

"You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result."

In life, there are, as we know, no guarantees but we at IBAS will continue, as always, to work towards our goals of justice for all asbestos victims and a global ban on asbestos.