

ASBESTOS: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Data received earlier this month confirms that global asbestos consumption is still over two million tonnes a year. Why, in the face of all that is known about the asbestos hazard, is this class 1 carcinogen still being used? And used by countries which are least able to provide measures to protect their populations; in 2010 69% of global consumption was in Asia, 22% in Eastern Europe. The answer is simple: politics. And let's not forget the oil which greases the political process: Russian Roubles, Kazakhstani Tenge, Ukrainian Hryvna and, lest we forget, Canadian dollars! There seems to be no limit to the greed of the international asbestos mafia, no deed to which it will not stoop to protect this industry of mass destruction. As far as asbestos stakeholders are concerned, when there is money to be made the threat to human life and the contamination of the environment are irrelevant. Events which took place last week in Switzerland bear this out.

On June 20-24, the 5th Conference of the Parties to the Rotterdam Convention met in Geneva. The Rotterdam Convention is a multilateral United Nations protocol under which vulnerable populations are provided a modicum of protection from dangerous substances. When a consensus has been achieved regarding the hazardous nature of a designated chemical or pesticide, that substance is included on the prior informed consent list of the Convention. This listing is not a ban; it is however a requirement that exporting nations provide documentation on the nature of the substance so that importers can make an informed decision as to whether or not they are capable of using it safely.

The subject of listing chrysotile (white) asbestos was on the agenda last week. Efforts to achieve the listing of chrysotile had been defeated on two prior occasions by asbestos refusniks led by Canada. Since the listing of chrysotile was defeated in 2008, however, Canadian civil society has been mobilized and the hypocrisy of the Canadian Government's pro-asbestos position has been exposed. Canadian citizens are asking why is asbestos being taken out of the Canadian Parliament and the Prime Minister's residence, if it is safe enough to be exported to developing countries? Why indeed. Canadian doctors, public health experts, human rights activists and trade unionists have declared their support for the campaign to shut down asbestos mining and officially ban asbestos; although a de facto ban already exists whereby virtually no asbestos is used in Canada, there is no legislation prohibiting its use.

In light of the outrage expressed at home, the 2011 Canadian delegation to the Rotterdam Convention decided to let others do its dirty work. During the course of the plenary session debate on June 21, objections to listing chrysotile were expressed by 5 out of the 143 Parties to the Convention (3%); Canada stayed silent. The announcement on June 22 that India, one of the objectors, had reversed its position paved the way for productive negotiations with other dissenters. When it became clear that the asbestos veto

was about to melt away, Canada – “the very silent elephant in the room” – emerged from the shadows.

With the statement: “**Canada is not in a position to support the listing of chrysotile in Annex 3. Canada is unable to join the consensus,**” by Canadian delegate David Sproule “all hell broke loose.” The intensive efforts made by the Chair, delegates and negotiators to find a way through this impasse were fruitless. Canada continued to stonewall attempts to ascertain its sticking point and repeatedly said “for over 30 years Canada has actively promoted the safe and controlled use of chrysotile.”

Asbestophiles, ever anxious to create doubt in order to forestall the introduction of trade restrictions, state publicly that scientific data are lacking which definitively proves that asbestos exposure can damage human health. And yet documents obtained by Canadian researcher Ken Rubin under the Freedom of Information Act show that Health Canada, which is the Canadian government’s health department, has no doubt as to the harm caused by asbestos. A 2006 memo from civil servant Paul Glover at Health Canada (HC) noted:

“We can not say that chrysotile is safe... HC’s preferred position would be to list... (HC acknowledges that) the final decision (regarding Canada’s position at the Rotterdam Convention) will not be made on the basis of health alone, and other key factors will need to be considered.”

Two years later, a HC draft memo was more explicit about the asbestos hazard:

“Health Canada’s Expert Panel presented a report to Health Canada that confirmed chrysotile asbestos poses a risk to human health. **Health Canada’s current position is that asbestos is a carcinogen which can cause lung cancer and mesothelioma.**”

Clearly the “other key factors” prevented the Canadian delegation from taking the advice of its own advisors, for by the end of last week (June 24), Canada’s position had not wavered; it refused to elucidate or explain its rock-solid stance on not listing chrysotile. The frustration amongst delegates was palpable, with the African Group of countries going as far as to “register its extreme disappointment in the manner in which Canada has acted...” Pointing out the financial and human costs incurred by the African delegations to attend the Geneva conference, the Group held Canada directly responsible for the failure to progress the chrysotile discussion.

In a virtually unprecedented move on June 24, a *Declaration on Chrysotile* was adopted by scores of delegations which expressed their disappointment at the chrysotile stalemate, highlighted the veto exerted by a “a small number of Parties for three consecutive Conferences of the Parties,” and resolved “to move forward to list chrysotile asbestos in Annex III...” Unfortunately, the next Convention meeting is at least 2 years away – 2 more years for global asbestos pushers to dump chrysotile on unsuspecting populations.

Before the dust from Geneva could even begin to settle, Prime Minister Harper reaffirmed his support for Canada’s asbestos industry by joining in celebrations to mark Saint Jean Baptiste Day, Quebec’s national holiday (June 24), at Thetford Mines, the heart of Canada’s asbestos mining region. The timing of his trip to asbestos central was not lost on Canadian journalists, one of whom said it reinforced the Harper Government’s “political marriage to asbestos.” Thetford Mines resident Real Couture, who called the Prime Minister’s visit “historic,” was proud of the asbestos industry which has, he said, “brought a lot of wealth to the region.” As far as he and the retired asbestos miners gathered in the local restaurant were concerned the risks are exaggerated and asbestos “can be used safely if handled properly.” Where have we heard that before?

If Canada was occupying the role of head bully boy in Geneva, it had ample support from the asbestos industry’s enforcers; lobbyists at COP5 included at least 15 representatives from Russia, Ukraine, Canada, Kazakhstan, India, Brazil, Mexico and Vietnam. The names of their paymasters constitutes a veritable who’s who of global industry lobbying groups:

Asbestos Lobbying Groups Present at COP5

	Organization	Delegates
Russia	International Chrysotile Alliance of Trade Union Organizations	2
Ukraine	Ukrainian Chrysotile Association	1
	Trade Union of Building and Building Material Workers	1
Canada	Chrysotile Institute	3
Kazakhstan	Confederation of Employers	1
India	Asbestos Cement Products Manufacturers Association, India	1
	Asbestos Information Centre	1
Brazil	Sao Paulo Federation of Construction Workers	1
	International Federation of Chrysotile Workers	1
	Brazilian Chrysotile Institute	1
Mexico	Mexican Institute of Fiber Industries	1
Vietnam	Vietnam National Roof Sheet Association	1

I have gone into detail regarding the events last week in Geneva as I feel that what took place was a classic example of how vested interests have manipulated international agencies, deceived regional bodies and lobbied national governments to achieve their objective: a continuation of the status quo which permits the unfettered sale of asbestos around the world.

How can we accept this? Some of us are old enough to remember when tobacco advertisements carried endorsements from medical professionals urging us to smoke a particular brand of cigarette. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, a “global trend-setter,” signaled the end to tobacco industry participation in meetings of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO). The

Convention recognized “that the spread of the tobacco epidemic is a global problem with serious consequences for public health.” Nowadays, the ability of the tobacco industry to influence global and national leaders is very much curtailed. Not so the asbestos industry.

At the 2008 ILO meeting in Seoul, members of the asbestos lobby were everywhere. With their hired scientists, spin doctors and translators, they made up a large and highly visible contingent. The double-fronted booth staffed by Russian Chrysotile advocates in the exhibition hall dispensed glossy commercial propaganda in Korean, English and Russian. At official sessions, speakers aligned with the chrysotile industry made personal attacks on ban asbestos campaigners and accused reputable labor federations of corruption for their ban asbestos positions. The behavior of the Russian lobbyists which was aggressive and thuggish, led to calls for security staff to eject disruptive participants from one seminar.

No doubt the same practices will be put into play at the *19th World Congress on Safety and Health at Work: Building a Culture of Prevention for a Healthy and Safe Future* due to take place in September 2011 in Istanbul. The ability of the ILO to improve occupational health standards through education and awareness raising at this high-profile event will be diminished by the presence of asbestos industry representatives. Bearing in mind the expense of holding such a gathering and the cost of delegates attending, what possible benefit can result from the attendance of the asbestos lobbyists?

ACTION POINTS

1. MEPs are requested to issue a denunciation of the obstructive behavior of the Canadian delegation at the Rotterdam Convention meeting last week. Measures should be considered such as sanctions and trade boycotts which would translate outrage into action. The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the EU, called the “most comprehensive trade agreement that either side has ever negotiated,” should be put on ice until the asbestos issue has been resolved.
2. MEPs are requested to challenge the \$58 million loan guarantee that the Quebec government offered the international consortium that plans to open a new asbestos mine in Quebec; this mine will export 5 million tonnes of asbestos to Asia over the next 25 years. This financial support is not only morally repugnant but is also an unfair trade subsidy, the purpose of which is to give an advantage to a deadly industry, contrary to World Trade Organization and CETA rules.
3. MEPs are asked to lobby the European Commission and Directorate General (DG) for Health and Consumers, DG Environment, DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, and DG Justice to explore all possible options for effecting a change in Canada’s asbestos policy.

4. MEPs are urged to raise their concerns about Canada's reckless endangerment of human life, especially the lives of vulnerable people in asbestos-consuming countries, at all possible forums.

In October 2011, *the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting* will take place in Perth, Australia. The subject of asbestos should be on the agenda of this meeting as Canada, a Commonwealth member, is exporting deadly asbestos to other Commonwealth members: India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. This issue should also be debated at meetings of the G7, G8, G20, NATO, the UN, and OECD.

In a similar vein, the Quebec Government's position on asbestos and its export of asbestos should also be challenged.

5. MEPs are requested as a matter of priority to place on record their support for a WHO Framework Convention on Asbestos Control and to work with their WHO and ILO partners to progress this initiative.

Prior to this being accomplished, MEPs are asked to make urgent representations to the WHO and the ILO to have asbestos lobbyists declared *persona non grata* at their meetings. Correspondence received by EU and EC officials from asbestos industry representatives should be treated with the same contempt as missives from the tobacco industry.

Conclusion

I have been studying the global asbestos industry for over 20 years. In that time, I have witnessed political dishonesty, industrial thuggery, corporate malfeasance, judicial manipulation, the misuse of science, the abuse of the legal process, physical and professional intimidation. What transpired last week in Geneva, transcended this – it was pure evil.

Tomorrow, Canada Day, we expect a decision to be announced by the Quebec Government regarding the finalization of plans to build a new asbestos mine. Should this project get the green light, we can expect that Canadian exports will fuel the deadly epidemic of asbestos diseases for many more decades. Canada is now a rogue state and should be dealt with in the same way as other administrations which have breached the acceptable level of behaviour expected of civilized societies. MEPs, European Union and European Commission officials are asked to play their part in achieving for all the world's citizens the right to an asbestos-free life.