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Media Release

Economic blackmail by Russia against Sri Lanka's asbestos ban decision slammed by international trade unions and health networks

International trade unions led by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Global Union Building Workers International (BWI) have joined with health networks including victims groups representing those suffering from asbestos related diseases and their families from around the world, in declaring their outrage at the economic blackmail on Sri Lanka by the Russian Government.

On December 18, 2017, Russia abruptly halted imports of tea from Sri Lanka, causing a major threat to the Sri Lankan economy. Just 2 days later the Sri Lankan Government announced its decision to defer banning asbestos imports from Russia.

Sri Lanka had previously announced a phasing out of asbestos starting January 1, 2018 with a full ban planned by 2024.

Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), said: "Imposing chrysotile asbestos on an unwilling nation is not fair trade, it is culpable homicide. Unions worldwide abhor this cynical economic blackmail. Russia must not and will not be allowed to blow a hole in fair trade rules."

"This desperate bid to try to force continued markets for Russia's deadly asbestos trade must be condemned and resisted," said Fiona Murie, Global Director, Construction and Health and Safety, Building and Woodworkers International. "We are concerned for workers and the community in Sri Lanka who are being exposed to this cancer causing material and urge the Sri Lankan Government to push ahead with its decision to ban chrysotile asbestos as soon as possible," she said.

The National Trade Union Federation of Sri Lanka (NTUF) has strongly urged the government to return to the ban timetable already announced and not bow to the pressure from Russia. “Being a big country, Russia has resorted to arm twisting its weaker trade partner. It is unfortunate that the Sri Lankan Government has to give in to these pressure tactics and accept hazardous material from Russia. The NTUF appeals to the Government of Sri Lanka not to give into the safe use theory of chrysotile asbestos being propagated by asbestos exporting governments led by Russia... the government should stick to its decision for a total ban by 2024,” said NTUF Secretary General, Padmasiri Ranawakaarachchi.

Sugio Furuya, General Secretary, Japan Occupational Safety and Health Resource Center (JOSHRC) and Coordinator of the Asia Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN) rejected claims that chrysotile asbestos does not cause cancer as claimed by the asbestos industry and Russian Ambassador to Sri Lanka.

“Chrysotile asbestos is the leading cause of asbestos related diseases in the world today. Chrysotile asbestos, along with all other types of asbestos, are without any doubt known to cause lung cancer, mesothelioma, asbestosis, laryngeal cancer and ovarian cancer. The international evidence on chrysotile’s direct link to a range of cancers is clear and well documented by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)¹”, he said. “We urge the Sri Lankan Government to take a complaint to the WTO on this action by Russia. There is already a WTO precedent from the 2001 test case, Canada vs. the European Communities over the French asbestos ban that declared that countries had the right to ban asbestos ‘to protect human ... life or health,’ within the meaning of Article XX(b) of the GATT 1994,” he added.

“We are dismayed that such blatant economic blackmail will mean more asbestos related deaths in Sri Lanka in coming years that would not have occurred had the phase out occurred in January as scheduled,” said Kate Lee, Executive Director of Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA. “Already estimates from global scientists suggest hundreds of deaths from exposure to chrysotile asbestos in Sri Lanka in 2016 alone. With recent high consumption of asbestos and the increased exposure of the population this is certain to rise sharply in coming decades,” she added.

Both the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have clear positions on the deadly nature of chrysotile asbestos. The WHO has issued numerous statements affirming that the most efficient way to eliminate asbestos-related diseases is to stop the use of all forms of asbestos.

“We applaud Sri Lankan trade unions and politicians who are resisting the delay in the banning of asbestos and petitioning the Sri Lankan Government to hold firm on the ban. These include Parliamentarian Ven. Athuraliye Rathana Thera and the Sri Lanka trade union NTUF,” said Laurie Kazan-Allen, Coordinator of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat. “This action by Russia, the largest remaining exporter of the deadly fibre must be investigated. We urge WHO and ILO to study this closely and report on their findings. There are so many lives at stake,” she said.

¹ <http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/>

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