

PRESS RELEASE

April 26, 2023

Asbestos Hazard at United Nations Meeting?

In a somewhat ironic twist of fate, questions are now being asked about the presence of asbestos at the Geneva International Conference Centre where hundreds of UN delegates will gather next month at the 11th meeting of the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade (COP11) and attempt, amongst other things, to implement calls to regulate the global trade in chrysotile (white) asbestos.¹ To date, efforts to protect global populations from avoidable exposures to chrysotile have been blocked by asbestos stakeholding countries led, nowadays by Russia formerly by Canada.

The CICG was built between 1968 and 1973 by Swiss architects André and François Gaillard, in collaboration with Alberto Camenzind; its construction coincided with the heyday for asbestos use in Europe.² Other iconic buildings in Geneva constructed around that time, known to have been riddled with asbestos-containing materials, included:

- the original headquarters of the World Health Organization built in 1966 and designed by renowned Swiss architect Jean Tschumi;³
- the International Labour Organization (ILO) headquarters, built between 1969-1974;⁴
- the United Nations Office in Geneva; while many of the structures at the 46-hectare Palais des Nations site were erected before 1950, building E dates from the 1970s. In 2020, plans were implemented to remove asbestos throughout building E.⁵

Given the ubiquity of asbestos use at the relevant time and the fact that Switzerland was a prolific asbestos consumer – using 17,655 tonnes in 1970 – it is more likely than not that asbestos was also used at the Conference Center. At the time of writing, no response had been received to emails regarding this matter sent to the media department at the Conference Center and the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions

Expressing his concerns, Coordinator of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN) Sugio Furuya, who attended COP6 of the RC (2013), said:

“Delegates to COP11 have a right to know whether the building they will be meeting in contains asbestos. Where and how much asbestos remains in the building? Given the fact that the building

¹ Kazan-Allen, L. *Light at the End of the Tunnel?* February 21, 2023.

<http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel.php>

² Sprayed-on asbestos technology was used in Switzerland until the mid-1970s; as it was never banned by the Swiss authorities it's impossible to say exactly when its use was stopped.

Rosselli, M. *The Asbestos Lie*. 2014.

https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/FINAL_The_Asbestos_Lie.pdf

³ According to the article cited below: “the exact quantity of asbestos containing materials within the main building will not be known until renovation is completed in October 2024.”

Nebehay, S. *WHO opens sleek new site as iconic building cleansed of asbestos*. December 21, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/who-opens-sleek-new-site-iconic-building-cleansed-asbestos-2021-12-21/>

⁴ Bradley, S. *Renovations set to transform International Geneva*. April 24, 2018.

https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/the-big-rebuild_renovations-set-to-transform-international-geneva/44067120

⁵ UN Geneva. *Building E. Project Description – Summary of renovation works for Building E*. Accessed April 24, 2023.

<https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Building%20E%20-%20Project%20Description-UNOG%20website-%20March%202020.pdf>

is now fifty years old, what condition are the toxic products in? Is the asbestos being managed; if so, what precautions are in place to prevent toxic releases? Are air monitoring measurements being taken as debates continue over facilitating the Convention's core objective of securing countries the right to know how to prevent the import of deadly chemicals and toxic substances?"

Echoing Mr. Furuya's comments, native New Yorker IBAS Coordinator Laurie Kazan-Allen said:

"Thousands of tonnes of asbestos insulation were removed during renovation work at the UN headquarters in Manhattan a decade ago.⁶ According to the Chief Architect, there was 'enough asbestos to cover a football field more than five meters deep with lethal blue dust...It was put on like mayonnaise. It was put on every pipe, every wall.'

All things considered, I believe that until we know otherwise, it is prudent to act as if asbestos is present within the Conference Center. I take no pleasure in thinking that the attendees might themselves be experiencing toxic asbestos exposures, much as citizens in asbestos-importing countries. Maybe if the delegates were made aware of the synchronicity of their right to know and that of importing countries, they might support the call by the Secretariat's Chemical Review Committee to include chrysotile on the list of regulated substances?"

From the country with the world's highest incidence of mesothelioma – the signature asbestos cancer – Chair of the Asbestos Victims Support Group Forum UK Rob Rayner added:

"We are saddened, but unsurprised, that there are concerns about the presence of asbestos in the Geneva International Conference Centre. Crumbling asbestos materials are found in so many public buildings erected in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. As we know, even minimal exposure to asbestos dust can cause the deadly cancer, mesothelioma. Delegates need to know, urgently, the condition of any asbestos in the Conference Centre."

Notes for Editors

1. For additional details, please email: Laurie Kazan-Allen (IBAS) at lkaz@btconnect.com or Sugio Furuya at: 2009aban@gmail.com

2. Information about the groups which issued this press release can be accessed at:

- Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN): contact Sugio Furuya as above.
- International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS)
Website: <http://ibasecretariat.org>
- Associação Brasileira dos Expostos ao Amianto (ABREA)
[Brazilian Association of the Asbestos Exposed]
Website: <http://www.abrea.org.br>
- Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum UK
Website: <https://asbestosforum.org.uk/>
- Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia
Website: <https://asbestosdiseases.org.au/>
- Solidarity Center US
Website: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/>

⁶ Tonnes of asbestos removed from UN headquarters in US\$2b renovation. September 22, 2012.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1042528/tonnes-asbestos-removed-un-headquarters-us2b-renovation>