



Asian Solidarity Delegation to Quebec

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December 15, 2010

Clément Gignac
Ministre du Développement Économique
Assemblée Nationale
Québec

Dear Minister Gignac:

We thank you for meeting with us in Québec on December 9.

We understand your comment that in Russia (another asbestos exporting country), we would not likely be accorded a meeting with the minister of Economic Development.

We would like to believe that Québec is a more advanced democracy than Russia. In addition, we wish to draw your attention to the fact that Russia is notorious for its “show trials” of the past, where the pretence of a just trial was allowed, but real justice was, in fact, denied.

We trust that our meeting with you was not a “show hearing”, where only the motions of listening were observed. In this regard, we are extremely disturbed by your comments in the media regarding the Canadian Cancer Society, surely one of the most authoritative experts on the cancer risks of chrysotile asbestos. You stated that you had “listened to them” but rejected their information and stressed your concern is for jobs and economic development.¹

The Québec Medical Association has expressed this same concern, criticizing as “wilful blindness” your refusal to heed the clear, strong, unanimous

¹ La Tribune, 29 juin 2010, La Société canadienne du cancer interpelle Charest au sujet de l'amiante http://www.cyberpresse.ca/la-tribune/estrie/201006/29/01-4294219-la-societe-canadienne-du-cancer-interpelle-charest-au-sujet-de-lamiante.php?utm_catégorieinterne=trafficdrivers&utm_contenuinterne=cyberpresse_B4_en-manchette_375_section_POS4

recommendation given to you by Québec's medical associations and health experts not to finance the Jeffrey mine.²

In the light of your refusal to heed Québec's leading medical authorities, including your government's own National Public Health Institute, who all oppose your government's promotion of chrysotile asbestos, you will understand, Mr Minister, our fear that the meeting with you may have been a "show" hearing. We would very much like to be proven wrong.

As you surely know, chrysotile asbestos represents 100% of the global asbestos trade and 95% of all asbestos that has ever been sold.

It is, in our opinion, a clear indication of your government's refusal to address the health risks of chrysotile asbestos that you not only refuse to heed Québec's medical authorities, but that also the Minister of Health, Yves Bolduc, is completely absent from the asbestos file.

As you know, a number of medical doctors in Québec, in Canada and in other countries have notified Minister Bolduc that, as a medical doctor, he is, in their view, violating his ethical obligations under the Québec Medical Code of Ethics by being complicit in your government's false information about the health risks of chrysotile asbestos and thus endangering the health of populations. We attach four such statements documenting the ways Dr Bolduc is violating the Québec Medical Code of Ethics.

We wish to list the key questions that we put to you and your response to these questions.

1) The Quebec Medical Association, as well as the Canadian Medical Association, l'Association des médecins spécialistes en santé communautaire du Québec, la Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec, la Société canadienne du cancer, and l'Association pour la Santé Publique du Québec have all told you that exporting asbestos is medically indefensible and that financing the Jeffrey mine would help spread the global epidemic of asbestos-related cancer.

OUR QUESTION : Why do you refuse the medical advice given to you unanimously by Québec's medical authorities and why do you substitute the opinion of local, asbestos-connected politicians, who have no medical

² AMQ, Communiqué, 8 déc. 2010, Selon l'Association médicale du Québec' le Ministre Clément Gignac fait de l'aveuglement volontaire dans le dossier de la garantie de prêt à la mine Jeffrey <http://www.cnw.ca/fr/releases/archive/December2010/08/c3694.html>

expertise on asbestos and no knowledge of working conditions in Asia, where all the Jeffrey mine asbestos would be sent.

YOUR ANSWER : No answer.

2) When you, the asbestos industry and the consortium of anonymous foreign investors speak of ensuring rigorous safety conditions in the developing world, equal to those observed in Québec, and say that you will carry out an annual audit, you are speaking of 0.1% of the life of Québec's asbestos in those developing countries. Once the asbestos from Québec is mixed with concrete and leaves the factory, it is dispersed to thousands of villages and towns and is sawed, hammered and cut by hundreds of thousands of workers, who may never have heard of asbestos and have no idea that it is hazardous. These countries have no capacity to enforce safety precautions for these hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom lack shoes, never mind safety equipment.

OUR QUESTION: How will you ensure rigorous safety rules are followed during the 99.9% of the life of the asbestos the Jeffrey mine would export?

YOUR ANSWER: We cannot do this. It is the responsibility of the importing country.

3) The Québec asbestos industry admits that sawing asbestos-cement materials with an abrasive saw is hazardous and should not be done without special protections for the workers and surrounding people. The CSST forbids sawing asbestos-cement materials without rigorous protections in place both during the sawing and for clean up of the resulting asbestos-contaminated dust.

OUR QUESTION: How will you ensure that asbestos-cement materials will not be sawed (a normal construction activity)?

YOUR ANSWER: No answer.

4) Your government published a report of a two-year study by Québec health officials which stated that asbestos is virtually no longer being used by Québec industries, but that where it was being used, there was a 100% failure rate to practice "safe use" requirements.³

Another report, published by the asbestos industry's registered lobby group (the Chrysotile Institute), bearing the official emblem of the Québec government,

³ Project provincial amiante <http://www.santepub-mtl.qc.ca/Publication/pdftravail/projetamiante.pdf>

states that the asbestos industry's studies on itself claim a 99.8% success rate in India, Indonesia and other countries in achieving "safe use" requirements.⁴

OUR QUESTION: How do you explain that, according to two publications endorsed by your government, Québec has a 0% success rate in implementing "safe use" standards, whereas countries in the developing world have a 99.8% success rate?

YOUR ANSWER: No answer.

5) When a building that contains asbestos is renovated or demolished in Québec, rigorous safety precautions are followed with trained workers wearing hazmat suits. When buildings that contain asbestos are renovated or demolished or are destroyed by a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, in developing countries, no such precautions are observed and no resources exist to implement such precautions.

OUR QUESTION: How will you ensure rigorous safety standards, equal to those of Québec, are followed in these circumstances?

YOUR ANSWER: No answer.

The question that you posed to us was: If Québec stops exporting asbestos, Russia would continue to export asbestos, so what would be gained?

Our answer is that Québec is Russia's biggest asset to help Russia sell asbestos. Québec is the key global propagandist putting forward the deception that chrysotile asbestos can be safely used and will cause no health problems in developing countries. Without the help of this propaganda, it would be far more difficult for Russia to sell its asbestos.

The Québec asbestos lobby works closely and regularly with the Russian asbestos lobby to promote use of asbestos in the developing world and to undermine efforts by the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization and the UN Rotterdam Convention to protect people from asbestos-related disease.

Consequently, Québec, like Russia, is seen as a major global public health obstacle with regard to asbestos. It is far harder to make progress to stop Russia's asbestos export while Québec acts as the global asbestos legitimiser.

⁴ Utilisation sécuritaire du chrysotile page 21,
http://www.chrysotile.com/data/Safety_use_Chryso_VF.pdf

It furthermore seems to us that if another country is, for example, exporting land mines, this would not be a justification for Québec to do so.

We would draw to your attention, Mr. Minister, that even Zimbabwe is recognizing the health hazards posed by damaged asbestos products and the difficulties of disposing of asbestos-containing material when it is replaced. An article a few months ago in the Zimbabwe Times states: "It can only be a matter of time before Zimbabwe has to conform to world norms and impose bans here, just as the country, a major tobacco producer, has followed global trends on limiting where people can smoke."⁵

If Zimbabwe is prepared to stop exporting chrysotile asbestos, then surely Québec can find the integrity to not finance a bankrupt asbestos mine. As you no doubt know, not only the WHO and the ILO have called for an end to the use of any form of asbestos. So has the World Bank, hardly an extremist organization.

We call on you, Minister Gignac, to put human life ahead of political interests, to respect the clear scientific consensus calling for an end to the use of all forms of asbestos and to reject the request by the anonymous consortium of foreign investors for \$58 million financing from your government to enable them to export millions of tonnes of asbestos to Asia for the next quarter century.

Around the world, leading medical experts, trade unions and public health defenders are horrified that your government is considering financing another generation of asbestos disease amongst the poorest and least protected people on the planet. We will be sharing this letter with them, as they are watching and are deeply concerned about what is happening in Québec.

Please find the courage and integrity to do the right thing. Please do not bring lasting shame upon Québec.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the Asian Solidarity Delegation to Quebec
Coordinator of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN)
Sugio FURUYA



⁵ The Herald, Zimbabwe, September 30, 2010, Asbestos ban can be a blessing
<http://www1.herald.co.zw/inside.aspx?sectid=2922&cat=13>

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