

GLOBAL ASBESTOS PANORAMA 2019

Laurie Kazan-Allen

Presented at: 2019 Asbestos Safety Conference
Perth, Australia, November 12, 2019

The 2019 Conference of Australia's Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency provided a timely opportunity not only to consider the current global asbestos landscape but also to review progress which has been made during the 21st century in the worldwide struggle for asbestos justice. That a seismic shift in the global discourse on asbestos has been accomplished is testament to the prodigious efforts made by civil society groups which have coalesced to give voice to asbestos victims, expose industry propaganda, and shame complicit governments into action. The once revered "magic mineral," is now thought to be responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths every year.¹

On September 26, 2019, a resolution by the United Nations' Human Rights Council was adopted by the UN General Assembly entitled: *Protection of the rights of workers exposed to hazardous substances and wastes* which reaffirmed the sanctity and indivisibility of human rights and condemned:

"the violations and abuses of the rights of workers in all parts of the world through unsafe exposure to toxic and hazardous substances, as reported each year and addressed in reports and discussions at the national, regional and global levels..."²

Resolution 42/21 noted with concern that: **"millions of workers globally die each year from unsafe or unhealthy conditions of work** despite clear human rights obligations relating to the protection of their health..." and urged **"the strengthening of the global regime for chemicals management to prevent and minimize unsafe exposure to hazardous substances..."**³

This much welcomed resolution was a manifestation of continuing UN commitment to act on the deadly hazard posed by workplace exposures to substances like asbestos. In fact, asbestos policies adopted by UN agencies, including the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, and the Human Refugee Agency are unambiguous: exposure to all types of asbestos can kill and the best way to end the epidemic of asbestos-related diseases is to stop the use of asbestos.⁴

¹ Takala J. et al. *Comparative Analysis of the Burden of Injury and Illness at Work in Selected Countries and Regions*. June 2017. Central European Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine [http://www.efbww.org/pdfs/CEJOEM Comparative analysis.pdf](http://www.efbww.org/pdfs/CEJOEM%20Comparative%20analysis.pdf)

² According to its website: "The Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system made up of 47 States responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe. It has the ability to discuss all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year. It meets at the UN Office at Geneva." <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/Home.aspx>

³ Draft Resolution: *Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development*. September 2019. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G19/281/51/PDF/G1928151.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴ Asbestos policies of major international agencies including ILO, WHO, IARC etc. Updated May 25, 2018. http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_polic_maj_int_agencies.php

UN efforts to eradicate asbestos exposures have reinforced grassroots work by victims' groups, trade unions and campaigners to protect populations and ensure that calls for asbestos to be banned were heeded by government leaders, politicians and decision-makers. Throughout the 21st century substantial headway has been made in improving the rights of asbestos victims and reducing the asbestos hazard. The figures below tell the story.

Global Asbestos Landscape: 2019 compared with 2000

	2000	2019
National asbestos bans	18	67
Countries using >500t of asbestos per year	66	23
Producer countries	14	3 ⁵
Global production	2,040,000t	1,170,000t*
*USGS estimate for 2018.		

Unfortunately, progress in minimizing asbestos use is not uniform, with consumption growing during the century in several Asian countries; of the 23 countries still using more than 500 tonnes annually in 2016, 17 (71%) were in Asia.

Asian Asbestos Consumption – Usages in 2000 and 2016 Compared⁶

Country	2000	2016		
	tonnes	tonnes	2016 v 2000 %	Change %
China	387,000	288,000	74	-26
India	143,000	308,000	215	115
Thailand	94,800	32,700	34	-66
Kazakhstan	105,000	25,200	24	-76
Uzbekistan	35,200	70,600	201	101
Indonesia	36,800	114,000	310	210
Vietnam	23,900	58,100	243	143
Sri Lanka	13,200	47,400	359	259
Top 8 Total	839,000	944,000	113	13
Other (Asia)	241,000	33,000	14	-86
All Asia Total	1,080,000	977,000	90	-10

Source: USGS.

Notes: Consumption figures for asbestos producers (here, China and Kazakhstan but also Russia) are unlikely to be reliable, because they rely on producers providing accurate production figures – in

⁵ In 2019, the only countries mining asbestos are: China, Kazakhstan and Russia; there are reports that Zimbabwe has been reclaiming asbestos fiber from mountains of mining waste – but the amounts involved have not been substantiated.

⁶ Up to 2013 the USGS classified Russia as part of Europe but now places it in Asia with regard to asbestos data. For comparative purposes we (IBAS) continue to use the old classification when outputting asbestos data sourced from the USGS; therefore Russia is not included in the list of countries in the table below.

general, these have not been forthcoming; the overall decrease in Asian usage is mainly due to bans imposed by Japan and South Korea.

It is noteworthy that during the century, consumption fell in all the asbestos-producing countries: Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Brazil.⁷

Taking Control: Changing the Dynamics

Throughout recent decades, alliances amongst ban asbestos activists and civil society partners have been highly incredibly productive: asbestos awareness campaigns, healthcare and medical outreach initiatives and the dissemination of multilingual resources contributed to raising the profile of asbestos dialogues in key countries.

Global Asbestos Congress: Past Present and Future (2000)

The Global Asbestos Congress 2000 was the first opportunity for asbestos victims, campaigners, community activists, medical specialists, scientific experts, engineers, politicians, civil servants and concerned citizens from around the world to come together to explore the disastrous impact of hazardous asbestos exposures. The four day-event, which was held in Osasco, Brazil, marked the emergence of the ban asbestos campaign onto the global stage. It set the precedent for much of what was to come and revealed the latent power of the virtual ban asbestos global network. The formation of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (1999), which was a collaborating organization with Brazilian and international partners in GAC 2000, was instrumental in rebooting the international ban asbestos campaign which increasingly used newly emerging technology and platforms: letters, telephone and fax machines giving way to email, internet messaging, skype and social media communications.

World Trade Organization (WTO) Rules in Favor of French Ban (2001)

The verdict by the WTO's Appellate Body, which upheld a decision made in 2000, validated the rights of Member States to prohibit the import and use of goods which contained carcinogenic substances such as chrysotile asbestos. The WTO case marked a sea-change from which there was no turning back; no longer could asbestos vested interests intimidate governments and deter them from acting in the best interests of their citizens. After the WTO decision, any country which chose to ban asbestos could do so free from the fear of an expensive lawsuit.

Mobilization of Ban Asbestos Activism in Asia (2004-2019)

By the mid-1990s, aggressive marketing by asbestos pushers had increased asbestos consumption in Asian countries to such an extent that usage in Asia surpassed that in any other region. The mobilization on asbestos in Asia which started at the historic Global Asbestos Congress 2004 (GAC 2004) in Tokyo⁸ continued with regional, sub-regional, bilateral, national and municipal conferences, discussions, workshops and initiatives organized by civil society groups from host countries in collaboration with ban asbestos activists and their partners including the Asian Ban Asbestos Network, the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat, the Building and Woodworkers' International, the Asia Monitor

⁷ According to USGS data for 2016: asbestos output was as follows: Russia 692,000 tonnes (t), China 200,000t, Brazil 200,000t and Kazakhstan 193,000t; asbestos consumption that year in the producing countries was reported to be: Russia 234,000t, China 288,000t, Brazil 120,000t and Kazakhstan 25,200t.

⁸ GAC 2004 was attended by 800 participants including 120 international delegates from 40 countries; there were 42 delegates from 13 Asian countries and regions.

Kazan-Allen, L. *Global Asbestos Congress 2004*. February 11, 2005.
http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_gac_2004_online_report.php

Resource Centre, Solidar Suisse, the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims, (ANROEV), Australia's Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency and others. As can be seen by the information below, the pace and spread of activities in Asia have increased dramatically over recent years.

Selected Asbestos Outreach Initiatives, Meetings, and Conferences 2004-2019

- 2004: Japan, Vietnam, India, Thailand
- 2005: Hong Kong
- 2006: Thailand, Bangladesh
- 2007: Japan, Hong Kong
- 2008: Korea, Philippines, India
- 2009: Hong Kong, Cambodia, India
- 2010: Indonesia, Vietnam, Canada, India
- 2011: India, Malaysia, Bangladesh
- 2012: Thailand, Korea, Russia, France
- 2013: Indonesia, Korea, Lao PDR, Bangladesh, Switzerland, Australia, India
- 2014: Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, India
- 2015: Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Switzerland
- 2016: Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
- 2017: Singapore, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Nepal, Cambodia, Lao PDR, India, Switzerland, UK
- 2018: Indonesia, Korea, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Lao PDR, Nepal, India
- 2019: Myanmar, India, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Korea, Switzerland, Brazil

The formation of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN) in 2009 proved to be highly significant. A-BAN was pivotal not only in the organization of grassroots events throughout Asia but also in decisive missions to North America, Latin America and Europe. These initiatives brought new voices into national asbestos debates and raised awareness of the asbestos hazard via both occupational and environmental exposures. The inclusion of asbestos victims as part of all ABAN delegations was critical.

Solidarity Delegation from Asia to Quebec (2010)

This historic A-Ban mission took citizens from asbestos-importing countries to an exporting nation – and the leader of global asbestos marketing efforts – to appeal for an end to deadly exports. The delegation members included a mesothelioma sufferer, the grieving daughter of a mesothelioma victim, a trade unionist, a community activist, and campaigners from India, Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Hong Kong. Their activities in Quebec, Montreal and Ottawa were widely reported as were the uncomfortable questions they asked; such as why was it acceptable for Canada to ship to Asia a substance too hazardous to be used at home.⁹

Asian Ban Asbestos Mission to Brazil (2019)

In April 2019, an ABAN delegation travelled to Brasilia, São Paulo and Osasco to confront Brazilian decision-makers, politicians, judges, trade unionists and members of the public with the reality of asbestos use in India and Indonesia, formerly the two biggest markets for

⁹ *Asian Solidarity Delegation to Quebec, Canada*. December 10, 2010.

http://ibasecretariat.org/quebec_mission_2010_arch_events.php

Asian Solidarity Delegation to Quebec, Canada – Briefings- Statements-Letters. January 11, 2011.

http://ibasecretariat.org/quebec_mission_2010_arch_statement_letters.php

Brazilian chrysotile asbestos.¹⁰ The reason for this mission was to counter calls by asbestos stakeholders for the resumption of asbestos mining (banned by a Supreme Court ruling of 2017) for export purposes. During the trip, delegation members explained that in their countries asbestos was used as just another raw material and personal protective equipment, fiber suppression measures and health and safety regulations were almost totally lacking. The presentations by asbestosis sufferer Siri Kristina, who had routinely been exposed to asbestos at a textile factory in Jakarta throughout her 23 years of employment, were well received. Ms. Kristina said:

“In Indonesia, there is widespread ignorance about asbestos; most workers do not have access to information about asbestos. Medical testing is expensive and out of reach for most workers so people live and die with asbestos conditions. This is the situation for many of my friends. They cannot be here so I am representing them when I call for solidarity from our brothers and sisters in Brazil who know very well about the human sacrifices demanded by asbestos stakeholders; our deaths are the price paid for their profits. Please stop sending asbestos to Asia.”

Asbestos Fight-Back

One manifestation of the growing momentum to ban asbestos is the mounting desperation of asbestos lobbyists who find themselves on an ever-shrinking ice floe, shunned by former allies in Canada, Brazil and Colombia. Lashing out, asbestos vested interests resorted to their well-worn play-book of dirty tricks, intimidation and fake news.

Dirty Tricks

In 2016, ban asbestos campaigners exposed the existence of a four-year covert operation by the asbestos industry to infiltrate the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN) by targeting key ABAN members including myself and Sugio Furuya.¹¹ In return for £466,000+ (Australian \$~850,000) in wages and expenses, a British operative insinuated himself into the network under the guise of a campaigning documentary film-maker. In this capacity, he was given access to asbestos activists in Asia and Europe and secured invitations to conferences and workshops.

Between July 2012 and September 2016, the spy cultivated contacts amongst asbestos victims, asbestos victims’ representatives, health and safety campaigners, trade unionists, documentary film-makers, journalists, technical and medical experts, politicians, civil servants and personnel from labor federations, regional bodies, the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the International Agency for Research on Cancer and the Rotterdam Convention during trips in the UK, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Canada and the US. The “confidential information” illegally obtained was transmitted to the spy’s handler at the K2 Intelligence agency in London, who reported to the client. Amongst the entities which received the product of the espionage operation were:

¹⁰ *Asian Ban Asbestos Mission to Brazil 2019*. April, 2019.

<http://ibasecretariat.org/asian-mission-to-brazil-apr-2019-link-page.php>

¹¹ Kazan-Allen, L. *Corporate Deceit - Asbestos Espionage at Home and Abroad*. March 18, 2019.

<https://ibasecretariat.org/ika-corporate-deceit-asbestos-espionage-at-home-and-abroad.php>

- **Wetherby Select Ltd.**, a holding company in the British Virgin Islands and one of six members of the Union of the Chrysotile [Asbestos] Cement Industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- Kazakh national **Nurlan Omarov**, from 2003 to 2012 a consultant to the Kostanay mine, Kazakhstan’s only chrysotile asbestos mine; since 2012, a paid consultant to Kostanai Minerals JSC – the company which operated the Kostanay mine.
- **Daniel Kunin**, “a politically well-connected US national also directly involved in Kazakhstan’s asbestos industry” as the “managing director of the Kusto Group, a Kazakh multinational with extensive interests in the chrysotile industry.”

This was not the first time that those representing the asbestos industry spied on opponents; it most certainly won’t be the last.¹²

Intimidation

Plans by the Sri Lankan Government for a phased ban on asbestos imports due to commence on January 1, 2018 were abandoned after Russia embargoed the import of Sri Lankan tea on December 18, 2017.¹³ Condemning Russia’s bullying, Secretary General Padmasiri Ranawakaarachchi of the National Trade Union Federation of Sri Lanka (NTUF) said:

“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 [will] 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.”

In April 2019, it was announced that the Russian Government had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sri Lanka Ministry of Health which stipulated that future Russian asbestos exports to Sri Lanka would be “non-hazardous.” Sri Lanka is the world’s largest importer of Russian asbestos sheeting.¹⁴

Fake News

For decades, asbestos propagandists disseminated “fake news” to create confusion amongst government decision-makers, trade union leaders, experts and consumers in order to minimize the impact of evidence substantiating the deadly repercussions of asbestos exposures. Examples of the lies told included the following:

- chrysotile (white) asbestos was the “safe” asbestos;
- asbestos could be used safely under controlled conditions;
- once incorporated within a cement matrix, asbestos fibers could not be liberated and therefore posed no risk to health or the environment;
- the adoption of safer working practices eliminated any hazards posed by the use of asbestos.

¹² Kazan-Allen, L. *Eternit vs. The Victims*. Chapter 11 in *Eternit and the Great Asbestos Trial*. 2012.

<http://www.ibasecretariat.org/eternit-great-asbestos-trial-chap-11.pdf>

¹³ MEDIA RELEASE. *Economic blackmail by Russia against Sri Lanka’s asbestos ban decision slammed by international trade unions and health networks*. January 3, 2018.

http://ibasecretariat.org/media_release_blackmail_of_sri_lanka_re_asb_ban_jan_3_2018.pdf

¹⁴ Россия будет производить неопасный асбест для Шри-Ланки [Russia will produce non-hazardous asbestos for Sri Lanka]. April 12, 2019

<https://gid55.ru/polit/973-rossiya-budet-proizvodit-neopasnyj-asbest-dlya-shri-lanki>

On October 2, 2019, a Russian language article seemed to take this disinformation campaign into new territory when it was alleged that both red meat and chrysotile asbestos had been falsely damned by the use of unsafe science.¹⁵ Discounting conclusions reached by Canadian scientists regarding the adverse health effects of red meat consumption as incorrect, exaggerated and hasty, the unnamed author of the Russian text headlined: *Proof of Guilt: How to Fan Hysteria from a Piece of Beef* alleged that scientific skullduggery and corrupt journalism were the principal weapons used to “persecute” both the meat industry and the chrysotile asbestos industry. In the section of this article sub-headed “Hysteria as a method,” the heavily-skewed and industry-friendly text was concluded as follows:

“Everything is very simple. The mechanics of the interaction are simple, as is evident in the case of red meat, chrysotile, and other things. The main thing is to inflate the scandal, throw out a ‘sensation’ in the media, hiding behind the authority of scientists.... From their research, through a ‘reputable’ media, a scandal is inflated, which perfectly impacts on the mass consciousness.”

The Times They Are A-Changing – Even in Russia!

It is noteworthy that despite claims such as those discussed above, there is growing evidence that Russian consumers and manufacturers are rejecting chrysotile asbestos:

- in September, 2019 local people in the town of Pershino protested over the environmental fallout from asbestos processing at a local factory;¹⁶
- a program to remove all asbestos-cement roofing on apartment buildings in “Old Moscow” is on schedule to be completed by the end of 2019;¹⁷
- on September 4, 2019, the Chief Oncologist of the Russian Ministry of Health was quoted as saying that a main cause of cancer was exposure to “classified chemicals, such as asbestos...;”¹⁸
- in July, 2019, a company in the Russian Republic of Bashkiria announced investment plans for the manufacture of “environmentally friendly” asbestos-free cement building products;¹⁹
- the use of asbestos-free brake pads as replacement parts for motor vehicles was recommended in an online Russian article (July, 2019) as products containing asbestos were deemed to be harmful to human health as well as the environment;²⁰

¹⁵ *Доказательство вины: как раздуть истерию из куска говядины* [Proof of guilt: how to inflate hysteria from a piece of beef]. October 2, 2019.

<https://dni24.ru/dokazatelstvo-viny-kak-razdut-isteriyu-iz-kuska-govyadiny/>

¹⁶ *Паронитовый заводик в Першино вредит под чиновничьей “крышей”* [Paronite factory in Pershino harms under bureaucratic “protection”]. September 29, 2019.

<http://www.ecosever.ru/article/22021.html>

¹⁷ *Сталь вместо асбеста* [Steel instead of asbestos]. September 22, 2019.

<https://rg.ru/2019/09/22/reg-cfo/do-konca-goda-v-moskve-ne-ostanetsia-mnogoetazhek-s-shifernymi-kryshami.html>

¹⁸ *Главный онколог минздрава назвал три основных фактора развития рака* [The chief oncologist of the Ministry of Health names three main factors for the development of cancer].

<https://m.business-gazeta.ru/news/437460>

¹⁹ *В Стерлитамаке запустят производство фиброцемента и экологически чистого шифера* [Production of fiber cement and environmentally friendly slate will be launched in Sterlitamak]. June 28, 2019.

<https://mgazeta.com/news/v-sterlitamake-zapustyat-proizvodstvo-fibrotsementa-i-ekologicheski-chistogo-shifera/>

²⁰ *Почему лучше отказаться от асбестовых тормозных колодок* [Why it is better to refuse asbestos brake pads]. July 23, 2019.

- in July 2018, a Russian journalist asked the unthinkable: “What would happen if asbestos was banned in Russia?”²¹

ACTION POINTS

Globally

In recent years, Australia has taken a leadership role in the campaign to regulate the global trade in chrysotile asbestos under provisions of the UN’s Rotterdam Treaty. Unfortunately in 2019, once again, the actions of a handful of asbestos refusniks – led by Russia, Kazakhstan, Zimbabwe, India and six others – ²² prevented progress being made. The Rotterdam Convention is not fit for purpose; until changes are made in the procedures for listing hazardous chemicals on Annex III, ruthless asbestos pushers will continue to exploit vulnerable populations and ill-informed governments. We urge Australian colleagues to lobby their government for changes to be made.

Regionally

Throughout most Asian countries, medical capacity to diagnose, support and treat victims of asbestos-related diseases is either non-existent or inaccessible by ordinary people. Australia is home to some of the world’s most renowned experts in the field of asbestos medicine and research. In March 2020, the 15th biennial meeting of the International Mesothelioma Interest Group (IMIG) will take place in Brisbane. We would urge Australian colleagues to take the opportunity of this gathering to consider measures, in collaboration with IMIG members, to build medical capacity in Asia so that victims will receive the diagnoses, treatment and support they need.²³

Australia’s membership of regional bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) intergovernmental forum and ASEAN Plus Six could present opportunities to lobby for action on the asbestos throughout the region. In 2019, the ten member countries of ASEAN had a total population of 622 million.²⁴

Nationally

Britain’s ban on asbestos came into effect on November 24, 1999. The 20th anniversary of this event has been a time for discussion and analysis.²⁵ It is clear from a myriad of research,

<http://kfaktiv.ru/h1-pochemu-luchshe-otkazatsja-ot-asbestovyh-tormoznyh-kolodok-title.html>

²¹ *Полмира считает асбест смертельно опасным веществом. Что будет, если его запретят в России?* [Half the world considers asbestos a deadly substance. What will happen if it is banned in Russia?]. July 18, 2018.

<https://66.ru/news/business/212859/>

²² George, O. & Kazan-Allen, L. *The Rotterdam Convention 2019*. May 11, 2019.

<http://ibasecretariat.org/og-lka-the-rotterdam-convention-2019.php>

²³ IMIG 2020.

<https://imig2020.org/>

²⁴ ASEAN: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations had 10 members States. ASEAN Plus Six includes: China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand.

²⁵ Kazan-Allen, L. *Reflecting on the 20th Anniversary of Britain’s Asbestos Ban*. British Asbestos Newsletter, Spring-Summer Issue, 2019.

<http://www.britishasbestosnewsletter.org/ban109.pdf>

Also see: Kazan-Allen, L. *Asbestos Life and Death in Brexit Britain*. Part I. British Asbestos Newsletter, Issue 105. Autumn, 2017

<http://www.britishasbestosnewsletter.org/ban105.htm>

Kazan-Allen, L. *Asbestos Life and Death in Brexit Britain*. Part II. British Asbestos Newsletter, Issue 107. Winter-Spring 2017-18.

<http://www.britishasbestosnewsletter.org/ban106.htm>

epidemiology and anecdotal evidence that despite the ban, asbestos exposures still occur at work, at school and at home. The lessons learned from Australia's experience of preventing imports of asbestos-containing goods, managing asbestos in situ, delineating protocols for removing asbestos material and ensuring that toxic debris is safely disposed should be shared. As you once exported asbestos, now is the time to export the knowledge about freeing society from asbestos both before and after it has been banned.

Concluding Thoughts

In the face of ruthless and powerful asbestos interests, the campaign to outlaw asbestos use is growing in strength and scope. Let the asbestos profiteers be warned. Ours is a legitimate, grassroots campaign supported by tens thousands of individuals around the world. Poisoning for profits is reprehensible, unethical and indefensible. Industry stakeholders can no longer hide behind their wealth or positions; they will be held to account for their crimes. Ban asbestos campaigners will not be bullied or deterred from their efforts to make the world a safer place. An asbestos-free future is possible!