

FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST!

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In the *Waste Land*, the poet T.S. Elliot wrote:

“And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

– The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot 1922.

Asbestos kills by stealth; it lurks unseen in the air and finds a welcome deep inside the human body. It attacks from the inside and humbles even the strongest; it breaks the body and eats away the spirit until breathing becomes a torment and eating a forgotten memory.

Millions died from asbestos-related diseases during the 20th century; governments, trade unions and international agencies colluded with multinational asbestos corporations to maximize profits and minimize costs: asbestos was just another raw material. Workers were expendable; those too ill to work were replaced. People unlucky enough to live near asbestos processing factories or to have relatives working with asbestos were collateral damage.

In the 21st century what has changed? Asbestos bans by forty industrialized countries have shifted consumption to the developing world. Nowadays, Asian countries consume over 50% of global asbestos production, with the biggest users being: China, India, Thailand and Indonesia:

	(tonnes)
China	491,954
India	192,033
Thailand	132,983
Indonesia	75,840

It is appropriate that the Asian Asbestos Conference 2006 is being held in Bangkok, capital of a country which currently has the dubious distinction of being one of the largest per capita users of asbestos in the world.

With all that we have learned about the tragic impact of asbestos contamination on human health, how is it possible that global asbestos consumption is still 2 million tonnes a year? Greed and politics motivate asbestos stakeholders to off-load the killer fiber on unsuspecting governments and consumers in developing countries; they dress up industry-sponsored events, such as the one held earlier this year in Jakarta, as “scientific conferences” and preach the industry gospel:

- chrysotile (white asbestos) can be used safely under “controlled conditions”;
- substitutes are as dangerous or more dangerous than asbestos;
- asbestos-cement products are indispensable for developing economies;
- chrysotile products pose no hazard to people who work in asbestos-containing buildings.

These statements are lies and will be exposed as such by international experts speaking at this conference over the next two days.

With the blessing of stakeholder governments, led by Canada, and with generous funding at their disposal, pro-asbestos lobbyists travel the world to disseminate industry’s propaganda. Any attempt to impose even minimal regulations on the global asbestos trade is fiercely resisted as illustrated by the blocking of United Nations efforts to add chrysotile to the Prior Informed Consent list of the Rotterdam Convention.

Mobilization of Counterpowers

The solidarity which underpins the mobilization of the virtual ban asbestos network is nowadays cited as a classic example of 21st century grass-roots activism. Formerly isolated groups are now working together on a global scale; using the internet, new alliances have been formed and coordinated action is being undertaken. The case of the asbestos-contaminated French warship, the Clemenceau, is an excellent illustration of the effectiveness of such global action and it is wonderful that we will have the opportunity to hear about this victory for civil society from our colleague Madhu Dutta, a member of the Platform on Clean Shipbreaking. Another example of coordinated action is the Regional Asbestos Conference in Sao Caetano do Sul, Brazil which was held 3 months ago by the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI). Whereas once upon a time, trade unionists would not have welcomed the input of victims’ groups at their meetings, these days it is routine for victims’ groups and NGOs to take an active part in BWI meetings and visa versa.

It is encouraging to report that asbestos hazards are now being actively debated in many developing countries including Bulgaria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, India, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. In these countries, until very recently, industry stakeholders controlled the national asbestos debate; this control has been shattered by the emergence of groups and individuals ready to challenge industry’s propaganda. Many of these new voices are represented at this conference and we are eager to hear about your experiences and to know what assistance can be given to help with your campaigns.

Year of Action on Asbestos 2006

To end the asbestos scourge, groups representing civil society declared 2006 the **Year of Action on Asbestos**. The range of activities organized in countries around the globe address a broad range of subjects.

Feb 27	Action Mesothelioma Day – UK
Apr 1	National Asbestos Awareness Day – US

	2 nd Annual ADAO Conference – US
Apr 18	Asbestos: Policy, Problems & Activity – Bulgaria
Apr 21	Ban Asbestos Nationally and Globally Workshop – Bangladesh
Apr 25-26	Open Hearing and Photo Exhibition: Clean Ship-breaking? – Belgium
Apr 20-21	Regional Asbestos Conference – Brazil
Apr 25-27	Asbestos Symposium for Latin American Countries – Brazil
Apr 28	Asbestos Workshop – Argentina
Apr 28	International Workers’ Memorial Day – Worldwide
May 14	March & Rally by Belgian Asbestos Victims – Belgium
May 16	Asbestos Seminar, House of Commons – UK
Jun 26-27	Asbestos-Related Disease Seminar – Egypt
Jul 26-27	Asian Asbestos Conference – Thailand
Sep 28-29	Asbestos Risk Reduction & Measurement of Asbestos Fibre Concentration – Poland
Oct 19-22	8 th International Conference of the International Mesothelioma Interest Group – US
Nov 23-24	International Asbestos Conference – Greece
Dec 3	Workshop on Asbestos Exposure – India
Dec 4-5	Asbestos Risks and Monitoring – Italy

International groups representing labor made a global asbestos ban a top priority on April 28: International Workers Memorial Day. In Burkina Faso, Chad, Guatemala, Panama, Indonesia, Malawi, Malaysia and Swaziland, trade unionists highlighted the asbestos hazard at demonstrations, rallies, information sessions and conferences. Once again, the BWI played a pivotal role in advancing the global ban asbestos campaign; we look forward to hearing more about the BWI’s campaign from Fiona Murie during her presentation tomorrow afternoon

Playing Catch-Up!

On May 5, 2006, a letter written by a Senior Official from the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed a huge shift in the organization’s position. Whereas formerly the WHO’s focus on asbestos was directed “towards assessment of the health risks of different types of asbestos and substitutes,” the WHO has now concluded that:

1. all types of asbestos cause asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer;
2. there is no safe threshold level of exposure;
3. safer substitutes exist;
4. exposure of workers and other users of asbestos-containing products is extremely difficult to control;
5. asbestos abatement is very costly and difficult to carry out in a completely safe way.

Dr. Jukka Takala, Director of the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) SafeWork Programme agrees:

“Asbestos is the most important single factor causing death and disability at work, some 100,000 fatalities a year... There is no ‘safe use’ of asbestos... the

ILO should have a campaign of its own to eliminate future use of asbestos, and properly manage asbestos in place today...

The task is now to increase the number of countries that have already eliminated future asbestos use from the present 40 countries to at least 100 in the coming 10 years. This should certainly reduce the asbestos use radically. The priority order is to concentrate on the present biggest producers, importers, and users of any kind of asbestos.”

On June 14, 2006, the ILO adopted a Resolution Concerning Asbestos which stated:

“the elimination of the future use of asbestos and the identification and proper management of asbestos currently in place are the most effective means to protect workers from asbestos exposures and to prevent future asbestos-related disease and deaths...”

Concluding Thoughts

The WHO and the ILO have joined a rapidly expanding list of international organizations, including the World Trade Organization, the Collegium Ramazzini, the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank, that have recognized the tragic impact asbestos has had on human health. If we accept the fact that human biology is universal, and how can it be otherwise, increasing asbestos consumption in Asia will, in years to come, assuredly result in an epidemic of ill-health and death.

People in Asia are entitled to live and work in a healthy environment. We do not need to see another pile of bodies to prove that asbestos is a killer. The experiences of asbestos victims and afflicted communities in Europe, North America and Australia tell us all we need to know. Working together we can end this needless slaughter; Asia’s asbestos-free future starts here!