

OSASCO: BIRTHPLACE OF THE 21ST CENTURY BAN ASBESTOS MOVEMENT

Laurie Kazan-Allen

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The solidarity which underpins the successful mobilization of the virtual asbestos network is nowadays cited as a classic example of 21st century grass-roots activism. In just a few short years, public, political and professional knowledge of the global asbestos scourge has gone from obscurity to prominence; bodies representing civil society such as the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization and the United Nations are actively engaged in the asbestos debate. More than forty national governments have asbestos bans in place and many more countries have imposed strict regulations on the use of asbestos. Asbestos victims' groups have multiplied so that individuals and families affected by asbestos disease no longer suffer in silence, marginalized by their illness.

In Japan asbestos has become front page news; in the last two years, asbestos has been the subject of numerous news programs and TV documentaries. The Japanese government which had long ignored the harsh reality experienced daily by asbestos sufferers has been forced to introduce schemes for medical care and compensation. As of March 27, 2006 a new law to compensate asbestos victims and bereaved relatives came into force. Under the law, former workers who suffer from pleural effusions and asbestos-related lung cancer can claim workers' compensation; all mesothelioma patients are eligible for financial assistance. Although there are loopholes in the new scheme, the law marks a change in the Government's attitude from one of total neglect to one of grudging recognition. These improvements did not occur spontaneously; they are the product of years of work by asbestos victims' groups in Japan. In November 2004, the second Global Asbestos Congress (GAC) was held in Tokyo; this event transformed the perception of the national asbestos epidemic from a hidden problem experienced by individuals and families throughout the country to a high profile media issue. During the opening ceremony of this conference, the organisers spoke of their inspirational visit to Osasco and said that on the flight back to Japan from Brazil they had already begun making plans for GAC 2004.

The Global Asbestos Congress 2000 (GAC 2000): Past, Present and Future (Congresso Mundial do Amianto: Passado, Presente e Futuro) was inspirational for those of us fortunate enough to have attended it and for others who read about it. It marked a new beginning of the global campaign to ban asbestos and obtain justice for asbestos victims. GAC 2000 showed us the latent power of the virtual citizens' global network; it demonstrated that from diversity comes strength and from decentralization comes ideas. New strategies are born out of the confluence of information and experiences of network members; our tactics evolve in response to the ever-increasing information flow. The ground-work for this responsive and flexible approach was laid in Osasco. The importance of bringing together asbestos victims, relatives, asbestos experts, engineers, sociologists, trade unionists, politicians, doctors, environmentalists, artists, students, civil

servants, community members and public campaigners was clearly illustrated by the success of the Osasco Congress. When the Mayor of Osasco, Dr. Silas Bortolosso, the Honorary President of the Congress, told delegates that Osasco would be one of the first Brazilian towns to ban asbestos, he set a positive tone which imbued the conference with a sense of optimism and hope that persisted throughout the event.

None of this would have been possible without the months of work which went into preparing the ground work for the Congress. The pioneering vision of the Brazilian organisers and their understanding of the need to make GAC an inclusive event were insightful. By obtaining the active participation of the local community as well as national groups and foreign experts, they obtained the practical, political, commercial and financial support needed to make the event the outstanding success it was. Their fresh perspective brought a new dynamism into what could have been formulaic and stale. The presence of ABREA members in their ABREA tee shirts was a constant reminder of the top priority at the GAC; it was not discussion for the sake of academic pursuit! The immediate aim of every session and workshop was to identify strategies to assist asbestos victims; the long-term aim was to increase the momentum for a global ban on asbestos.

On a personal note, I must beg your indulgence while I take a few moments to express my appreciation to ABREA, its advisers and supporters. In the frantic days before the Osasco Congress, an international colleague asked me a question for which I did not have a ready reply. Being a bit annoyed by that, she said: "You are out of your depth. You have never done anything like this before." My response was: "No one has ever done anything like this before." Working together we broke the mold and by so doing we showed what could be done. I have never forgotten the debt of gratitude that I owe to my dear friends Eliezer João de Souza, Aldo Vicentin, José Jesus Pessoa (the unforgettable Zé da Capa), Dr. João de Souza Filho and, last but by no means least, my dear friend and sister Fernanda Giannasi. Since Osasco, I have participated in many asbestos conferences and events; I have never met anyone as unflappable and supportive as Chen Wan Hang, the GAC's Mr. FixIt! Please accept my heartfelt thanks and know that the work I have done since GAC 2000 owes much to the lessons learned in Osasco.

Some months ago the newspapers in Europe were full of stories about the decision of the French government to send a redundant warship to India for scrapping. The Clemenceau, formerly one of the country's most prestigious ships, contained up to 1,000 tonnes of asbestos plus quantities of PCBs, lead and mercury a small matter which the French Government chose to keep from the public, the courts and the media. In its desire to profit from one of the world's dirtiest industries, the Government attempted to side-step international protocols and global agreements designed to prevent the export of hazardous waste. Working together, asbestos victims' groups in France and international NGOs mounted a highly visible campaign to expose the hypocrisy of a government with strict national laws for minimizing occupational exposure to asbestos which was prepared to expose unprotected workers in Indian scrapyards to a cocktail of toxics.

The groups which campaigned to prevent this from happening represented a range of interests including asbestos victims, the environment, human rights, clean ship-breaking and the ban asbestos movement:

France

- Ban Asbestos France
- ANDEVA: National Asbestos Victims' Association
- The Anti-Asbestos Committee at Jussieu University

India

- The Corporate Accountability Desk

International Bodies

- Greenpeace
- The Basel Action Network
- The European Federation for Transport and Environment
- The North Sea Foundation
- The International Federation of Human Rights
- Bellona
- NGO Platform for Clean Ship-breaking
- The International Ban Asbestos Network
- The International Ban Asbestos Secretariat

The media-grabbing antics of Greenpeace were supplemented by judicial actions in the highest administrative court in France (Le Conseil d'Etat) and appeals to India's Supreme Court. On February 15, 2006 Le Conseil d'Etat ordered the French Government to suspend the transfer of the ship; the same day President Chirac announced that the 27,000 tonne ship, then in the Arabian Sea, would be brought back to France.

Whilst the saga of the Clemenceau ended with a victory for civil society, many more contaminated ships wind up in ship-breakers yards in India, Bangladesh, China and Pakistan. Some are even sold to Latin American governments. The Foch, sister ship to the Clemenceau, was sold to Brazil in November 2000 for \$50 million. Although a spokesman for the Brazilian Navy says that 55 tonnes of asbestos were stripped from the ship, now renamed the porta-aviões São Paulo, before it left France, the quantity and condition of the asbestos-containing products which remained onboard were unknown.

The Clemenceau and the Foch were more than just sister ships. They were identical in many dimensions and facets:

Characteristic	Clemenceau	Foch
Ordered	1955	1955
Displacement	24200 tonnes (32800 full load)	24200 tonnes (32800 full load)
Length	265 m	265 m

Width	51.20 m	51.20 m
Draught	8.6 m	8.6 m
Propulsion	6 Indret boilers 4 steam turbines producing 126,000 HP 2 propellers	6 Indret boilers 4 steam turbines producing 126,000 HP 2 propellers
Speed	32 knots	32 knots
Complement	1338 men, including 64 officers	1338 men, including 64 officers

Given how similar the two ships are, if the Clemenceau contained up to 1,000 tonnes of asbestos-contaminated products, the Foch could still have 945 tonnes on-board. Two other French ships are believed to be on their way to Argentina; everything about the movement of these ships is being kept secret not only from the public but also from civil servants in Buenos Aires who have tried to ascertain the status of the asbestos on-board these ships.

Awareness of the problem is half the battle. Although it is unrealistic to demand the immediate removal of all the asbestos contained within our national infrastructures, the hazard must be carefully managed. Asbestos audits must be made and asbestos products labelled so that plumbers do not unknowingly expose themselves to asbestos dust whilst mending leaking pipes or electricians inhale fibers whilst drilling holes to install new wiring. In this field, the town of Osasco continues to lead the way. The fact that a week of asbestos awareness activities are being held here to coincide with International Workers' Memorial Day is significant. The GAC 2000 taught us the importance of tackling the subject with multiple resources and from many angles. I applaud the on-going efforts being made in Osasco to protect workers and the public. In the presence of so many pioneers of the global ban asbestos movement, I pledge my continued commitment to pursue our goals of: a global asbestos ban and justice for all asbestos victims.