

A Call for the Americas – Ban Asbestos Now!

Over the last century throughout the Americas, exposure to over 110 million tonnes of asbestos has destroyed lives, contaminated the infrastructure and polluted the environment.¹ The asbestos risk to human health has been widely acknowledged by international agencies tasked with protecting public and occupational health as well as by independent scientists and medical professionals.² Asbestos has been classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer as a human carcinogen; this assessment is supported by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), both of which believe that the future use of asbestos should be banned. Eminent groups representing civil society in the Americas also advocate action on asbestos:

- the Canadian Cancer Society called for national prohibitions on asbestos use and exports (2007);³
- the Canadian Labor Congress issued a resolution supporting global action to ban asbestos (2008);⁴
- the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health advocate an asbestos ban in U.S. workplaces;
- the American Public Health Association urged Congress to ban the trade and use of asbestos (2009).⁵

While only a few countries in the Americas have banned its use (Argentina, Chile and Uruguay), some conscientious authorities have taken unilateral action.⁶ On January 29, 2009, Brazil's Minister of the Environment prohibited the use of asbestos throughout his agency; within months, both Brazil's Ministers of Health and Culture followed suit. In April 2009, the U.S. Acting Surgeon General urged "every American to become aware of the public health issues of asbestos exposures and the steps they can take to protect their health." "There is," he said "no level of asbestos exposure that is known to be safe."⁷

Since 2000, groups representing civil society throughout the Americas have worked together to quantify national legacies and delineate efforts to minimize hazardous exposures.⁸ As a result of this research, we conclude that:

- it is not possible to use asbestos safely; the only "safe use" of asbestos is no use;

¹ In an email received on January 28, 2010, Robert Virta of the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that total asbestos consumption in North America and South America was 42.82 million tonnes between 1900 and 2008. He estimated that since 1900 North American production (and sales) of asbestos was 66 million tonnes and South American production (and sales) was 4.6 million tonnes.

² *Asbestos Policies of Major International Agencies*. 2009

http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_polic_maj_int_agencies.php

³ http://www.ibasecretariat.org/lka_2_steps_forward_5_back.php

⁴ http://www.ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_uproar_canada.php

⁵ APHA document: *The Elimination of Asbestos*. November 10, 2009.

<http://www.apha.org/NR/rdonlyres/EB4545B4-C728-4B1F-9DD0-F11E4D0737D5/0/AsbestosDraftNov102009.pdf>

⁶ In Brazil, four states and several municipalities have banned asbestos.

⁷ Statement from Acting Surgeon General Steven K. Galson about National Asbestos Week.

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/news/pressreleases/pr20090401.html>

⁸ The efforts of the ban asbestos campaign, which includes asbestos victims, asbestos victims' support groups, trade unions, environmental bodies, public health and environmental activists, academics and concerned individuals, have been documented on the website: <http://www.ibasecretariat.org>

- the use of asbestos and asbestos-containing products is unjustifiable, unsustainable and uneconomic;⁹
- safer products exist and should be used;
- the transfer of asbestos technology and the dumping of asbestos exports from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere is a violation of human rights.

On behalf of our fellow citizens of the Americas, we call on global organizations, regional bodies, and national authorities to support moves to ban asbestos throughout North, Central and South America. Given that the right to health is inviolate and that exposure to asbestos can be fatal, it is beyond doubt that the steps taken to date by regional bodies such as the Organization of American States, the Pan American Health Organization, Mercosur (the Southern Common Market), the Andean Community and the majority of national governments have been woefully inadequate.

As a matter of urgency, all Pan American regulatory bodies and governments should follow the WHO and the ILO and adopt policies calling for asbestos to be banned. Working with international bodies, they should set a timetable, no more than 2 years, for the implementation of asbestos prohibitions, delineate a strategy for achieving this objective, adopt a just transition for affected workers, and ensure that support and medical care for the asbestos-injured is provided. We urge official bodies to work closely with those most affected by the asbestos epidemic – the asbestos victims – in all negotiations and consultations.

Representatives from the U.S., Canada, and Brazil gathered together in Chicago on the occasion of the 6th annual meeting of the Asbestos Diseases Awareness Organization on April 10, 2010 declare our support for this call to action. Having consulted with colleagues throughout our continents, we are confident that the statements expressed herein are an accurate representation of the current asbestos reality in the Americas. To end the needless slaughter, an immediate commitment to ban asbestos, accompanied by a detailed action plan for achieving this objective, is essential; the citizens of the Americas have the right to live a life free of asbestos pain and death.

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⁹ When costs such as healthcare and social security for the injured and the bill for decontamination and disposal of toxic waste are factored into the equation, the initial cost advantage of asbestos products evaporates.