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## ASIAN ASBESTOS CONFERENCE - *A Brief Report* 26-27 July 2006, Bangkok (Thailand)

### Introduction

The BWI<sup>1</sup> has been an active player in the campaign against a total ban on the use of asbestos. To achieve this, the BWI adopted a comprehensive policy at its Congress held at Singapore in 1989, which endorsed for a global ban on asbestos. Ever since, BWI affiliates have been working through public meetings, petitions and letter writing campaigns to build support for a global ban. At this year's International Labour Conference (ILC) in June at Geneva, the BWI successfully lobbied for a resolution calling for the elimination of all further use of asbestos globally. Also, it was clarified that the ILO Convention 162 on safety in the use of asbestos does not provide a justification and/or endorsement of continued use of asbestos.

In the past few years, the BWI has partnered with other groups working towards a total ban on asbestos, including International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS) and Global Asbestos Congress (GAC). The BWI has been regularly represented at International Conventions on health and safety, including asbestos. Large delegations have been sent to the Global Asbestos Congresses held at Osasco (Brazil) in 2000 and Tokyo (Japan) in 2004, respectively. As a follow-up to the GAC held at Tokyo in 2004, an Asian Asbestos Conference was organised at Bangkok, Thailand on 26-27 July 2006.

### Conference Participation and Proceedings

Nearly 300 participants, including about 40 speakers and 54 international delegates from North America, Europe, Australia, Africa and a large Asia contingent had gathered for this important event. The conference was organised by the Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health, Government of Thailand and co-sponsored by the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and World Health Organisation (WHO).

A twelve-member strong BWI delegation attended the conference, which included participants from BWI affiliated unions in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. The conference provided a global forum for world leaders, trade unions, medical professionals, environmental experts, victims and advocacy groups to discuss key issues surrounding asbestos exposure. A total of eight sessions were organised on a wide range of issues pertaining to asbestos, including a workshop on trade union action on asbestos.



Fiona Murie, BWI Director-Global Programme on Occupational Safety and Health spoke at the opening and also made a presentation on the campaign strategy of the BWI towards the end of the conference. The campaign strategy focused on:

- First, a global ban on the use of asbestos, 90% of which is currently used in cement products. The WHO clearly states that all forms of asbestos, including chrysotile, cause asbestosis, lung cancers and mesotheliomas.
- Second, safer substitutes exist, such as cellulose, PVA or polypropylene, and that there is a need to promote those through information and technology exchange.
- Third, to promote the protection of workers from exposure to asbestos, which is already in place and that, means promoting ILO Convention 162 and its accompanying Recommendation as a minimum standard.
- Lastly, campaign for the rights of those affected by exposure to asbestos so as to ensure that they have sympathetic legal / medical advice and that they are properly compensated.

The BWI efforts in adoption of a resolution banning asbestos at the ILO Conference in June 2006 was well appreciated and in recognition of the good work done, Fiona was given the Ray Sentes Award. The Conference adopted the "*Bangkok Declaration 2006*", which apart from other important issues recognised the key role of the trade union movement in pushing for a gradual ban on asbestos.

### **Side Meetings & Recommendations**

The conference also gave enough time to the participants to interact with a wider lobby on the ban asbestos campaign, which included other trade unions and advocacy groups. Also, the conference provided a good opportunity to hold internal side meetings for the BWI participants to work out action plans and strategise themselves for the next phase of action. Two important recommendations emerged from the discussions held:

1. Some of the affiliates indicated that they had received detailed responses from the Canadian High Commission as a result of their protest letters. In this regard, Sis. Fiona vouched to help in developing pointers for counter arguments and that could be well used in writing follow-up letter(s) to the Canadian High Commission in respective countries. Also, it was recommended that the template could be also used to write and alarm the respective national / state governments on the negatives of asbestos usage and to lobby with them in light of the new resolution adopted at the ILC.
2. To work towards establishing links / network with the World Health Organisation and other socially and sympathetically inclined hospitals, research institutes and doctors who could help trade unions in areas of disease identification and control, advise on preventive measures, workers' health surveys, research, publication and other areas of mutual interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Building and Woodworkers International. Website: <http://www.bwint.org>