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Rotterdam Convention in crisis, say civil society groups

Handful of countries hijack international agreement, intended to protect human health and environment.

Civil society groups attending the Rotterdam Convention conference in Geneva are expressing grave alarm that the Convention has been hijacked by the asbestos industry, which is determined to prevent the environmental and health protections of the Convention from being implemented.

For the fourth time, a handful of countries allied to the asbestos industry have refused to allow chrysotile asbestos to be added to the Convention's list of hazardous substances, even though the Convention's expert scientific committee has repeatedly recommended that it be listed and even though it has been recognized that the listing of chrysotile asbestos meets all the criteria of the Convention. The committee's conclusions are endorsed by all leading medical organisations and by the World Health Organisation.

"It is outrageous that seven countries – Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Zimbabwe, India and Vietnam – are turning the Rotterdam Convention into a Convention that protects profits of the asbestos industry, instead of protecting human health and the environment," said Kathleen Ruff, co-coordinator of the Rotterdam Convention Alliance.

"The Convention requires that countries practice responsible trade by obtaining prior informed consent before they export hazardous substances to another country," said Laurie Kazan-Allen, coordinator of IBAS, UK. "But these seven countries are determined to practice irresponsible trade and to hide the hazards of chrysotile asbestos."

Fernanda Giannasi, a labour inspector in Brazil, reports that, in her job, she daily sees products containing chrysotile asbestos entering her country without labels, and tells of the great many victims who develop cancers from asbestos exposure in her country. "Since these countries refuse to follow responsible trade information practices, it will force other countries to resort to other measures, such as a full ban on asbestos," said Giannasi.

"Russia and Zimbabwe recently ratified the Convention and attended the Rotterdam Convention conference of the parties for the first time," said Sugio Furuya of the Asia Ban Asbestos Network. "It seems that they ratified the Convention with the sole purpose of wrecking it in order to protect the profits of their national asbestos industry. This is shameful, cynical conduct on their part. They are ruthlessly destroying the Convention to achieve their aim."

"If the Convention is not going to be implemented and become empty words on paper, then what is the point of having the Convention?" asked Emmanuel Odjam-Akumatey of Ecological Restorations, Ghana. "The credibility of the Convention, and all 152 countries who have ratified the Convention is at stake."

"These seven countries, allied to the asbestos industry, are demonstrating contempt for the right of countries to prior informed consent, which is the whole purpose of the Convention," said Alessandro Pugno of the Association of Asbestos Victims Families, Casale, Italy. That is why we have once again brought one hundred people, representing asbestos victims organisations, in front of the UN headquarters in Geneva and presented to the president of the conference their [letter](#), calling for chrysotile asbestos to be listed.

“As well as civil society, the vast majority of parties to the Rotterdam Convention are dismayed and supported the statement by Australia yesterday stating that the cost of inaction will be huge,” said Elina Doszhanova of Social-Eco Fund NGO from Kazakhstan. "Although we are a major exporting country of chrysotile asbestos, there is no in-depth research and understanding of the current and future health and environmental costs of inaction."

“Chrysotile asbestos is widely used in Kyrgyzstan, but our citizens are not all informed; we call on our governments to apply the precautionary principle, to protect public health,” says Dr Vladimir Korotenko, BIOM Kyrgyzstan.

“This small group of countries tries to use as an excuse, that listing would cause extra costs. They have been repeatedly told that this is not a criterion of the Convention. Furthermore, this argument is nonsense and omits the enormous economic costs caused by chrysotile asbestos, which is already up in the hundreds of billions of dollars. While industry takes the profits, the costs are put on the shoulders of the public taxpayer. The World Bank recognized this fact and therefore recommended against use of chrysotile asbestos,” said Alexandra Caterbow, senior chemical expert at WECF International.

Last year, an Italian court sentenced two asbestos executives to 16 years in jail for criminally suppressing information about the hazards of asbestos, resulting in up to 3000 deaths, including citizens living near their asbestos-cement factories.

“By not listing chrysotile asbestos, the Convention is enabling the industry to carry on the same criminal cover-up of the hazards of chrysotile asbestos, which will result in hundreds of thousands more tragic deaths, which could and should be prevented,” said Dr. Barry Castleman, former consultant on asbestos to the World Bank. “This is a crime against humanity and the whole world should be scandalized.”

Fernanda Giannasi, said the handful of asbestos countries achieved a small delay, but by doing so they further isolated themselves from the world community and incensed the majority of parties to the convention who insist on obtaining their right to know, as soon as possible. Civil society and victims organisations are determined to continue their struggle to protect all people from deadly hazards of chrysotile asbestos.

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