

(STATEMENT)EPA HEARING ON PROPOSED BAN ON ASBESTOS

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1. The Nigerian Public Health Officials while acknowledging the hazardous nature of asbestos fibres believe that controlled use rather than a ban is desirable. Government agencies particularly the Environmental & Occupational Health Division of the Federal Ministry of Health has taken interest in the asbestos issue since 1976. A Committee was then set up to survey the conditions of working in the asbestos industries. The Government through this Ministry obviously showed great concern for the safety of the workers but was satisfied that, considering the many valuable uses of asbestos, a controlled use is more preferable to a ban. They, therefore, developed a code of practice to ensure the safety of employees in the industries and a system of waste disposal that would avoid undue exposure of the general public to fibres.

The officials of the Federal Ministry of Health and the Factory Inspectorate of the Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity jointly with the Nigerian Asbestos Association (NAA) have been working closely to ensure that maximum efforts are made by the industries to safeguard the safety and health of all workers. This explains the stand taken by the Nigerian Government delegate at the recently concluded ILO Conference in which Safety In the Use of Asbestos was an item on the agenda. The delegate emphasized and explained the Nigerian Government's position, that attention should be paid to how to use asbestos safely.

In general terms, the issue of substitutes must be seen as a natural trend of progressive development. Man will always explore his environment and look for conquests. But the Nigerian Government officials' attitude is that no sufficient evidence has been adduced to completely absolve the possible asbestos fibres substitutes from danger to health. Moreover, talking about substitutes now with the dangerous premise that they are safer, may discourage industries from doing their best to ensure the safe use of asbestos. Efforts must, therefore, be concentrated on the measures that will guarantee safety in the use of asbestos.

The officials are also aware of the fact that products containing asbestos when properly handled pose no increased risk to the health of the general public and since these products are very valuable to our socio-economic development, the officials see no need to restrict their use in the immediate future.

2. As mentioned earlier, while national legislation to govern the use of asbestos is going through its painfully slow routine processes, a Code of Practice has already been worked out and is binding on all asbestos industries in the country. There is an Association of asbestos industries - Nigerian Asbestos Association which has as its members all factories that use asbestos in their manufacturing processes. The code of practice is based on the ILO Code of Practice and is accepted by the government officials as a very useful and practical instrument. The government officials from time to time carry out inspections of the factories nationwide using the code of practice as standard guage. The Nigerian Asbestos Association on its own initiative, set up a three man committee comprising two senior managers who are engineers and also in-charge of safety in their factories and myself.

We conduct in-house inspection of the factories not only to identify flaws but also to advise less experienced member companies on how to handle asbestos safely. It is pertinent to mention here that the two engineers come from factories having affiliation with oversea companies with well established experience and tradition in working with asbestos. The Committee, therefore, offers advice freely on issues ranging from pure administrative arrangements to highly technical problems. Technical assistances on matters relating to health and safety are offered to the factories that need them by those that have them - examples are in the field of medical and dust monitoring services.

As the Chairman of the Committee, I liaise with the government officials from the Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity and the Federal Ministry of Health. These officials see their roles as not only just to enforce the rules but also to advise and help to ensure that necessary measures are taken to minimise exposure to asbestos fibres. They have lent support to the Association's requests for foreign exchange to enable members purchase equipment and spare parts necessary for dust control and protection of workers in the factories. This is in appreciation of the efforts and commitments of the members of the Association to ensuring that asbestos is used safely.

In our exercises as an inspection team, emphasis is laid on the three main principles namely: Engineering Control; Work Practices and Work Place Hygiene. *Workers and users training is vigorously pursued.*

My participation in the inspection visits was very instructive. I observed an appreciable degree of awareness, both on the part of management and workers, of the dangers of the careless use of asbestos fibres and the need to handle the material with respect. I am convinced that given the level of knowledge and technical know-how available, the disaster that attended the early abuse of asbestos fibres will not occur again. *No asbestos related disease has been diagnosed in the Nigerian<sup>14</sup> industries so far.*

3. The use of asbestos containing products notably pressure pipes in Nigeria dates back to more than fifty years but the oldest factory which actually commenced the manufacturing of these products here is only twenty-seven years old. Asbestos-cement products have found great use in Nigeria in the form of roofing sheets, ceiling boards, pipes and lately floor tiles. Although asbestos-cement products are late comers in the building industry in Nigeria their qualities have earned them appreciable recognition. Low cost housing estates, school buildings, market place buildings and shades are areas where asbestos-cement products have begun to make in-roads because, they are cheaper and more durable and compete favourably for aesthetic beauty. The role of asbestos-cement pressure pipes in the provision of potable water and for sewage as well as irrigation can not be over emphasized. Their economic advantage over the other pipe materials is overwhelming. And where there is no pipe borne water for over 70% of the population of a country with estimated 80 million people, it becomes necessary to think of the costs, reliability, and durability of water pipes.

4. Perhaps every relevant question to ask here is why does an apparently internal affair issue of the US Government bother us in far away Nigeria. The answer is simple. If the governments in Europe think that what the US government does can in any remote way influence situations in their countries, then saying the same of most if not all developing countries is a gross understatement. There is no way a US government decision in this issue will not produce bandwagon effect. Many countries and in particular the developing ones look up to the US for leadership in areas of science and technology.

So if the US says it is bad for her citizens well of course it has to be bad for the citizens of the world. Consequently if the US bans asbestos in whatever form in the US, it virtually stands banned all over the world. Already newspaper columnists in Nigeria are screaming and calling for a ban and citing US as one of the countries which has taken action.

A very disturbing fact of this EPA move is that the proposed action contradicts the scientific evidence of today. It is a contradiction because at the time the scientific world seems to be saying we now know asbestos and ready to exploit its valuable qualities, EPA seems to want to encourage us to venture into the unknown once more. We have learnt to rely on the verdicts of the scientific world and find no valid reason to doubt her now. To us the verdict seems to say - yes asbestos is a harzadous material but we can use it safely. It is against this background that I will take a peep into what an eventual ban of the use of asbestos will mean to us:-

- i) Although I do not envisage a dramatic shut down but the end point of a gradual phase-out is that the people will loose their jobs anyway. In Nigeria because of the large family units and the extended family system, any job lost may mean putting the welfare of up to ten people in jeopardy. This is not a thing to be ignored.
- ii) The ban on asbestos containing products will deprive the governments of the developing countries of cheap, durable and available building materials. I do not know if the proponents of this action appreciate the fact that provision of simple shelter can still be a luxury in many countries of the world. It is a luxury many people or governments can not afford twice during a man's life time.

Of particular mention must be made of market places. During the recent years almost all Nigerian cities have had a share of big fire engulfing markets. Most of these markets have been built with materials that rather fueled the fires leading to loss of lives and millions of <sup>dollars</sup> Naira worth of goods. Asbestos-cement building materials should be reasonable options and are being favourably considered, a ban on these materials will further worsen the socio-economic situation. Just remember that when an average Nigerian is not working in the office, he is a petty trader. Building market stalls and shades is an essential programme of the governments. Asbestos-cement building materials are cheap and provide relatively safe shelters.

- iii) The various State governments are striving to meet the challenge of providing pipe borne water for the teeming population. Irrigation projects have become very essential especially when one considers the menace of drought in some areas. These are projects that touch on basic necessities. Presently many state governments are contemplating using asbestos-cement pipes for these projects; a ban on the use of asbestos of any type and in any form will upset these plans. Some people and organisations will simply take advantage of the situation and without understanding the full implications. Any government will be hard put to disregard public outcry that will always cite the US as an example.

So you see that the EPA proposal will immediately affect the three most basic items - shelter, water and by implication, food supply.

There is so much to be done in these areas that any contribution that asbestos can make must be encouraged.

In conclusion, I will like EPA to reflect on:-

- a) the number of people whose quality of life will be enhanced by provision of decent shelter and who may be denied this by their action.
- b) the number of lives that can be saved through the protection against fire and other accidents asbestos containing materials provide.
- c) the fact that for us in Nigeria, water borne diseases are by far more serious public health problems and continued use of asbestos-cement pipes to alleviate these problems deserves to be encouraged.

Finally, I will like to stress categorically that I am not here to make a case for asbestos industry; I am pleading on behalf of the millions of people in my country and some other countries who may be condemned to many years of suffering and deprivation if the EPA proposals go through. I plead that in the interest of humanity, the US Government should please go along with the rest of the world and accept that Asbestos has to be used but with all the necessary cautions.

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