

NOTES
FOR A PRESENTATION
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AT THE PUBLIC HEARINGS
OF
THE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AGENCY
ON THE PROPOSAL TO BAN
THE USE OF ASBESTOS

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I would like to put EPA's proposal to ban asbestos and asbestos-based products in two broad perspectives:

- a) the perspective of Quebec-U.S.A. relations and
- b) the perspective of the Third World countries

On the first point, I call on my own personal experience as a Quebecker active in politics as early as the 1950's and a member of the Quebec Government in the 1960's to stress the fact that asbestos remains today as a symbol of the social transformation of Quebec which has nurtured the major political change of the 1960's called the «Quiet Revolution».

Up to the 1950's, asbestos was synonymous of economic exploitation of labor, close association not to say connivance between the political world and big business management, the absence of any health protection measures in dangerous industries, particularly in the asbestos mining sector, with a high level of industrial diseases and mortalities which took many individuals and families as their victims.

In 1949, a major strike broke out in the asbestos mining industry with repercussions in all parts of Quebec. It lasted nearly six months. It became a turning point in Quebec's history. From then on, the years 1950's witnessed a radical change in the social climate of the Province as well as in the actual operations of the asbestos mining industry. In this particular sector, management and labor cleaned up

their act in order to provide this industry with new modern equipment designed to prevent asbestos dust to come into contact with workers and in order also to train labor into using appropriate precautionary measures. From a broader economic and political perspective, the signal of a new social order had been given by the asbestos workers to the whole of Quebec. The years 1960's later established the political framework and legal formulation for this new social order.

In that sense, the name of asbestos means much more than its tens of thousand jobs, direct and indirect . It symbolizes the rupture from traditional Quebec and the start of a new era. Against the web of recent history, it symbolizes the social change upon which modern Quebec has been shaped up, politically and administratively.

Should the Government of the U.S.A., through one of its Agencies, take a decision which would have the effect of destroying this industry which has already cleaned up its act and which constitutes such a symbol in the life of Quebec, one should wonder what would be the consequences on Quebec-U.S.A. relations.

Quebeckers and New Englanders have a long history of close ties and friendly relations. Through migrations, trade, tourism and radio/T.V. communications, people on both sides of the border have become ever closer to each other. The current negotiations to develop freer trade between Canada and the U.S. are only the most recent illustration of such deeply rooted feelings. A

decision of your Agency leading to the closing down of the Canadian asbestos mining industry would seriously jeopardize those long standing ties and friendship. The question is important to the point that Prime Minister Mulroney of Canada has raised it personally with President Reagan, and Prime Minister Bourassa of Quebec has raised it in unequivocal terms when he met with U.S. trade officials in Washington earlier this year.

From an entirely different perspective, I would like to call now on the experience which I lived in the 1970's as head of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Canadian counterpart to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The people and the Government of both the U.S. and Canada are strongly committed to helping the Third World countries improve their economic situation and adopt appropriate means to take their long term development into their own hands. Such an objective involves not only agricultural development but also developing a progressively stronger industrial base.

A U.S. decision to ban the use of asbestos and asbestos-based products would run contrary to this objective in a very strong manner.

Developing countries are increasingly using asbestos as a raw material in asbestos cement, friction materials, gaskets, textiles and various plastic products. For instance, the asbestos import value in 1984 was:

- \$13 m. for Algeria, in Africa
- \$37 m. for Mexico, in Latin America
- \$30 m. for Thailand, in Asia

In smaller or lesser industrialized countries the volume of imports is smaller. But in relative terms, it represents in most developing countries a non negligible part of the work force and a component of a significant number of building materials and consumer articles.

A ban on asbestos and asbestos-based products and the use of known substitution materials would bring about in Third World countries a fourfold severe economic duress:

- a) additional unemployment
- b) the need to acquire new technology and new equipment
- c) increased consumer prices
- d) increased drain of scarce foreign exchange

Moreover, some substitution materials use cellulose fibers which are extracted from wood. When one realizes the problem of desertification which plagues a large part of Africa and the broader phenomenon of deforestation which is a problem for a very large number of Third World countries, one wonders if the preservation of a natural and healthy environment can be better served by a further drain on world forest reserves or by a controlled use of asbestos which does not make any such demand.

I had the opportunity to visit a number of African countries in recent months and colleagues visited a majority of Latin American countries. In all cases, a ban on asbestos would be a blow at their economy and it would increase the already severe unemployment problem. Although the number of jobs involved is not available on a country by country basis, we know that it runs by the thousands in many developing countries. If we take the case of Mexico, the number of direct jobs in various asbestos-based products reaches 5,000 while the number of indirect jobs is of the order of another 10,000. Such jobs should not be endangered without very solid grounds.

In most Third World countries visited by representatives of the Asbestos Institute, the health security conditions in the industry were observed to be of a quality comparable to conditions existing in Canada and in Europe, although there were some exceptions.

In this respect, the Asbestos Institute, with the support of the Canadian Government, has offered to Third World countries to examine their health protection conditions in their respective industries, to propose any appropriate corrective measures and to set up training programs for their staff. A first instance of a training program on «the controlled use approach» will take place in Quebec Province from September 15th to 26th next for the benefit of people from developing countries. Other programs in Third World countries are now at the organizational stage.

Clearly, the economic and social interest of developing countries opposes any ban of asbestos and asbestos-based products. Their interest goes with the improvement of health protection measures.

I strongly suggest this is the orientation your Agency should adopt in the common interest of all.

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