

Press Release

‘VGCL calls for government to complete roadmap to ensure chrysotile asbestos is banned by 2020 in Vietnam, the labelling of all asbestos containing materials and tax incentives for replacement non-asbestos roof sheet building be introduced to protect workers and consumers from future related cancers’

Hanoi Vietnam 21st July 2017

Today, more than 80 participants from Ministries, trade union, media and civil society participated in an historic workshop on cancer risks from chrysotile asbestos and the need for urgent action to ban chrysotile in Vietnam.

The workshop was hosted by Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) and supported by Union Aid Abroad APHEDA, the Australian government and a wide range of international organisations from Australia, Asia, North America and Europe. The representative of the Canadian Embassy in Vietnam, First Secretary Harriet Roos, informed the meeting of Canada’s decision to ban asbestos in 2018.

Vice President VGCL Mr Mai Duc Chinh and Mekong Regional Manager of Union Aid Abroad APHEDA Dr. Sharan KC, jointly chaired the meeting.

The VGCL Vice-President making a strong call for Vietnam to move forward with a roadmap to ban chrysotile asbestos by 2020. Declaring evidence settled on the matter and noting the Vietnam Government decision in 2017 to support listing of chrysotile onto Annex 3 of the Rotterdam Convention, Mr Mai Duc Chinh also called for labelling of all asbestos containing products as a matter of urgency to inform both workers and consumers of the risks. He also urged for government action on tax incentives to encourage jobs and competitive pricing within the substitute non-asbestos roof sheet sector.

The workshop brought international experts from Canada, Australia and Japan to Vietnam, to provide clear evidenced based understanding on asbestos related diseases and the lessons from other countries that are paying a high economic and health price for their earlier use of chrysotile asbestos.

International experts included Mr Peter Tighe CEO of the Australian government’s Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA, ASEA Director Nick Miller, Professor Yv Bonnier Viger from the Faculty of Medicine of Laval University and Regional Public Health Director for Gaspésie-les-Îles, in Quebec, Canada, Mr Sugio Furuya, General Secretary, Japan International Center for Occupational Safety and Health (JICOSH) and Phillip Hazelton Coordinator of the Program to Eliminate Asbestos related diseases Union Aid Abroad APHEDA.

Local health and occupational health experts from Ministry of Health, VGCL, Provincial Trade Unions and the OSH Association provided details of health hazards, a step by step plan to ban asbestos in Vietnam by 2020 and reports of pilot programs in safe removal of asbestos roof sheeting from houses in Nghe An Province.

Many participants expressed frustration at the misinformation and fake news from the Roof Sheet Association being continually reported in Vietnam media.

The workshop was also supported by the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Australian Government Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) and a range of international organisations including Right On Canada, International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), Asia Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN), Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and Solidar Suisse.

The workshop focused on evidence on exactly how chrysotile fibres cause cancer, the types of cancer caused, current trends in banning chrysotile worldwide and current consumption trends in Asia, the cost of continuing to use chrysotile, correcting misinformation from the asbestos industry and actual experience from Australia, Japan and Canada in dealing with the terrible legacy of using chrysotile last century.

Even after detailed reporting on overwhelming and independent scientific, international evidence, representatives of the Roof Sheet Association in Vietnam again claimed there was no proof chrysotile asbestos causes cancer and that the cost of removal is huge for the country.

Peter Tighe CEO of ASEA explained that it is important for Vietnam to act to limit the health impact of asbestos use to workers and the community. The government has to be aware of the real costs of continuing to allow chrysotile asbestos products.

'Frankly we are appalled that issues of that have been settled in science for more the 30 years are still getting a hearing here in Asia. Only the asbestos industry, their paid researchers and countries producing chrysotile claim otherwise.

International evidence on the carcinogenic nature of chrysotile is overwhelming and indisputable among independent scientists, medical specialists and researchers the world over, including from UN agencies.

'Australia is now suffering from the enormous health, economic and environmental cost of our past use of asbestos. We are here in Vietnam to share lessons learnt from Australia and good practice responses to the problem, to help Vietnam develop its own policy to save lives and costs in the future' he said.

'Australia banned asbestos and Asbestos Containing Materials (ACM's) in 2003 and yet we are still suffering from an estimated 4000 deaths per year from asbestos related diseases. Australia has set up a stand-alone agency, ASEA, to work on coordination of eradication of asbestos from buildings in Australia and to coordinate managing existing asbestos risks. Given our deadly experience with asbestos, the Australian Government has prioritized our agency to work towards a global ban of asbestos' he explained.

Mr Phillip Hazelton reported on the heavy economic and health burden Vietnam will face if it does not ban and **international consensus among independent scientists that there is no such thing as 'safe use' with chrysotile and materials made from it.** Claims that asbestos roof sheeting is the only product available is cheapest and the only product strong enough, on all counts, is false. The health costs to government of continued use are enormous and governments need to weigh environment and health costs for the general community against the benefit of a relatively small section of construction industry especially when ready substitutes are available" he said.

Mr. Sugio Furuya stressed that Japan failed to act quickly enough towards banning chrysotile asbestos, waiting until an asbestos epidemic became visible in the country. Japan has introduced a ban on

asbestos in 2004. As a result of the delay, thousands are now being killed due to the past exposure to asbestos.

In 2001, the verdict of the World Trade Organization has confirmed ‘the right of member states to prohibit the import and use of materials containing carcinogenic substances such as chrysotile’ and that ‘chrysotile is an established carcinogenic, there is no safe threshold and controlled use is not an effective alternative to the national prohibition’ he said.

Prof. Yv Bonnier Viger said that the Canadian experience was timely in the region as Canada has also recently joined many other countries in announcing a ban on asbestos. **‘Currently most countries in the world either don’t use asbestos or have formally banned it. That’s around 124 countries. Only 25 countries still use more than 1000 tons per year.** I am very pleased to say Canada has moved from being the main producer of asbestos fifty years ago to now fully banning asbestos in 2018. All those countries ban or don’t use for a simple reason. This is because of the cancer risks from exposure to this fiber and the readily available substitutes of similar quality and price,’ he said.

Dr Sharan Kc explained that **‘all speakers from the countries invited had no conflict of interest in regard this issue** and their motivation was purely to alert countries like Vietnam to the suffering and on-going high cost of our countries using asbestos last century, in the hope the health and economic costs can be avoided if Vietnam moves in time to ban chrysotile as all countries presenting at the meeting have done’.

Further Information:

Sharan KC: +84915925709

Phillip Hazelton: +84917878314

Hoang Thi Le Hang: + 84 91 358 1995