

Media Release 13 August 2019 Lane Xang Hotel, Vientiane, Laos

Today in Vientiane, international scientific experts from UN agencies and many countries in the region are joining with Lao experts to share experiences on causes of workplace cancer in Laos and to urge quick action to stop using chrysotile asbestos in the country.

International experts from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Geneva Switzerland, World Health Organisation (WHO) Manila Philippines, Australian Government Asbestos Safety Eradication Agency (ASEA) as well as Vietnam, Korean and Japanese occupational health agencies today applauded the Lao Government for recent completion of its National Action Plan to Eliminate Asbestos Related Diseases. They also urged quick action to stop the import and use of chrysotile asbestos in Lao PDR in 2020, as proposed in the Ministry of Health approved plan. Lao would then join 66 other countries around the world who have banned chrysotile asbestos.

Today's workshop is hosted by the National Assembly of Lao's Committee of Social Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Health. Speakers from the Lao Trade Union, Ministries of Health, Labour and Social Welfare and Industry and Commerce will join international scientists and independent experts in the workshop.

Speaking before the workshop, Mr Nick Miller Director of, the Asbestos Eradication Agency in Australia, expressed strong concern for future rates of asbestos related cancers that are likely among Laos workers in asbestos roof sheet factories, nearby communities and consumers who buy asbestos containing materials unless action is taken quickly.

'We are alarmed that Laos has in recent years been the heaviest user of chrysotile asbestos in the world per head of population, according to the Lao government's National Asbestos Profile. This suggests a big spike in lung cancers and some other asbestos diseases in coming decades unless chrysotile asbestos is banned. What is most concerning is that Laos is a recent large importer of the fibre - since 2009 imports increased rapidly, well after many other countries have already banned' he said. 'We used chrysotile asbestos extensively last century before we banned it in 2003. We are paying the price now. Australia now has an estimated 4000 deaths a year from asbestos diseases and its costing the country over \$500 million a year in medical costs and in remediation. Laos can minimize future costs like this by banning as soon as possible' he said.

Disturbingly, the meeting heard of the first two diagnosed cases of mesothelioma in Laos via a recent study of lung cancer patients by a PHD student at the Health Science University of Laos. Mesothelioma is a specific hard to detect cancer of the lining of the lung and other organs and can take 20-40 years to develop from when people are exposed to the chrysotile fiber. It's only known cause is exposure to asbestos. The workshop is supported by the Asbestos Safety Eradication Agency Australian Government, Australian Embassy Direct Assistance Program and Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA.

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