

GLOBAL ASBESTOS PANORAMA 2010 – THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Laurie Kazan-Allen

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At the beginning of this month,¹ the 19th Commonwealth Games opened in New Delhi. With thousands of athletes and support staff from 71 countries attending, these games were the largest sporting event in India's history as well as the most expensive Commonwealth Games ever held. Although estimates for the price tag vary, the final bill could exceed \$10bn.²

You would have thought that such a high profile event would have been the perfect occasion to showcase India's building products and construction expertise. Oddly, enough, however, one substance widely used in building products throughout India was not invited to the party.³ Like Cinderella, asbestos was left at home, hidden away from public view.⁴

Despite attempts by activists to obtain an explanation of the Government's boycott of asbestos for this prestigious project, no such explanation was forthcoming. It is not hard to see why: politically and commercially, the authorities were between a rock and a hard place. If asbestos had been incorporated in the infrastructure designed for the Games, quite apart from the fact that workers' health would have been endangered, it would have generated negative publicity and jeopardized the participation of international athletes. It is unlikely that a world class runner or top notch gymnast would consciously expose themselves to a substance categorized as a class 1 carcinogen. If, on the other hand, the authorities had publicly prohibited the use of asbestos, a double standard would be revealed whereby buildings destined for use by foreigners were to be asbestos-free while those for local people were not.

On its own, India's prohibition of asbestos at the Games could be seen as an isolated case. However, when viewed in conjunction with the fact that China, the world's biggest user of asbestos, banned asbestos from the 2008 Olympics, a trend begins to emerge. If the world's two largest asbestos consumers refuse to compromise their international standing by using asbestos in infrastructure prepared for major events, how can they maintain the illusion that asbestos can be used safely. After all, human biology being what it is, a substance which can cause respiratory disease and cancer in English swimmers and Australian divers can very well do so in Indian and Chinese citizens.

¹ The Commonwealth Games opened on October 3, 2010.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_Games
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11460568>

³ According to data from the United States Geological Survey, from the time the games were awarded to India (2003) until the building of the infrastructure was completed (2010), nearly 2 million tonnes of asbestos fiber had been consumed in India.

⁴ Kazan-Allen L. *Why was Asbestos not used at the Commonwealth Games?*
www.ibasecretariat.org

The decision not to use asbestos in these circumstances illustrates a major shift in the global consensus on asbestos. The actions taken by the Indian and Chinese government reflect how much has changed in the perception of the asbestos risk. Whereas once upon a time policy makers talked blithely about the “controlled use of asbestos”, nowadays nothing short of “no use” is acceptable to civil society. This change has been the result of years of consensus building by asbestos victims, trade unionists, health and safety campaigners, medical and legal professionals and other members of civil society who have reached out not only to the grassroots but also to governments, international agencies and social partners.

A brief look at some salient statistics reveals just how much has changed in the first decade of this century.

Changing Panorama of Asbestos Use: the Years 2000 and 2010

Year	National Bans	Asbestos Consuming Nations ⁵	Regional Consumption (% of Global Usage)		
			Asia	Europe	South America
2000	18	66	47	35	10
2010 ⁶	52	39	64	26	8

Note: Africa is not included in this table; in 2000, Africa was responsible for 6% of global usage, but in 2009, less than 1% of global usage occurred in Africa, according to USGS data.

There has been a 41% decrease in the number of asbestos consuming countries and nearly a 3-fold increase in the number of countries banning its use. An analysis of the timing of national bans is informative.

Implementation of National Bans⁷

Period	Years	National Bans Adopted	No. per Year
1982-1991 ⁸	10	8	0.8
1992-2001 ⁹	10	15	1.5
2002-2010 ¹⁰	9	29	3.2

⁵ Only countries using more than 500 tonnes of asbestos a year were included.

⁶ The asbestos usage data are derived from USGS figures for apparent consumption; since no data for 2010 are available yet the figures for 2009 were used as a guide to likely consumption in 2010. It should also be noted that in the USGS datasets , Europe is taken to include Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

⁷ See information on national bans available at:

http://ibasecretariat.org/alpha_ban_list.php

http://ibasecretariat.org/chron_ban_list.php

⁸ The 8 countries which adopted asbestos bans during the period 1982-1991 were: Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Israel, Switzerland, Austria, Netherlands.

⁹ The 15 countries which adopted bans during the period 1992-2001 were: Finland, Italy, Germany, Brunei, Kuwait, France, Bahrain, Poland, Belgium, Saudi Arabia, UK, Ireland, Latvia, Chile, Argentina.

¹⁰ The 29 countries which adopted bans during the period 2002-2010 were: Spain, Luxembourg, Uruguay, Australia, Honduras, South Africa, Japan, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece,

In the last nine years, the number of national bans adopted exceeded those achieved over the previous twenty. Perhaps by 2020, even countries like China, India and Russia will have acknowledged the deadly hazards of exposure to all types of asbestos and banned its use.

Shifting Perceptions

For decades, vested asbestos interests maintained a stranglehold on national asbestos debates, in some countries they still do. Raising public awareness of the asbestos hazard required redefining the questions being asked and the voices being heard in these debates. In democratic countries, the only thing which changes government policies is public pressure. That asbestos has been banned in 52 countries owes much to the collaborative efforts of asbestos victims groups, trade unions, NGOs, and members of the global ban asbestos community.

In the main, the initial investigations undertaken by asbestos victims groups related to country-specific issues; making common cause with social partners, they pressed for improvements in medical care for the injured, the introduction of government benefits and the adoption of legislation to minimize hazardous exposures. The work of bi-lateral and international networks which were formed by these pioneers of global action revolutionized the perception of asbestos throughout the world. The formation of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS) in 1999 marked a turning point in the global campaign to ban asbestos. IBAS works closely with members of the ban asbestos network to organize meetings, support outreach programs, produce written and visual material and facilitate communication. The IBAS website provides the ban asbestos network with a window to the world. Detailing news of developments, uploading stories and widely disseminating information, increases the visibility of the network and contributes to the momentum being achieved by ban asbestos campaigners.

An example of how national bodies coalesced with social partners to tackle issues of mutual concern arose in regards to the operations of a United Nations protocol: The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Pesticides and Chemical in International Trade (Rotterdam Convention).¹¹ The Convention is a multilateral agreement intended to limit the damage done by exporting harmful chemicals and pesticides to developing countries. Initially, Convention procedures worked well and substances deemed hazardous were added to a list of goods subjected to minimal export requirements.¹² All this changed, when the Convention's Chemical Review Committee recommended that action be taken on chrysotile asbestos. In 2004, 2005 and 2006, a minority of asbestos stakeholder governments derailed the Convention's discussions on listing chrysotile.

Attempts to highlight the obstructive tactics of the asbestos bloc began in 2004 when an IBAS representative, present at the Rotterdam Convention deliberations as an official observer, denounced as "a misrepresentation" a claim made by the Ukraine delegate.

Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Portugal, Slovakia, Egypt, Jordan, Gabon, Seychelles, Croatia, New Caledonia, South Korea, Oman, Qatar, Mozambique.

¹¹ <http://www.pic.int/home.php?type=s&id=77>

¹² The Prior Informed Consent List of the Rotterdam Convention.

Referring to a paper published by Dr. Richard Lemen, the Ukraine delegate had alleged that Lemen believed “there is not an adequate basis for banning (chrysotile) asbestos.”¹³ In fact, Dr. Lemen’s paper concluded:

“chrysotile per se can induce mesothelioma...These findings along with the results of the experimental studies leave no doubt that the scientific evidence supports the carcinogenicity of chrysotile alone in the induction of mesothelioma.”¹⁴

Having observed first-hand the lies being told and the efforts of vested interests to sabotage the Convention,¹⁵ IBAS, in conjunction with the Building and Woodworkers Federation, produced a publication entitled: *Chrysotile asbestos: Hazardous to Humans, Deadly to the Rotterdam Convention*¹⁶ which was distributed at the Convention’s 2006 meeting. By 2008, it had become clear that entrenched opposition to listing chrysotile was in danger of destroying this much valued and much needed United Nations initiative. In recognition of this threat, the Rotterdam Convention Alliance (ROCA) was established; members of the global ban asbestos network played a vital part in its formation and operation.¹⁷ At the 2008 meeting of the Convention, ROCA members constituted a highly visible and articulate counter voice to the industry lobby. They consulted with national delegations, issued daily press releases and held a well-attended side meeting. The next meeting of the Convention is in eight months.¹⁸ As groups representing populations in major asbestos consuming countries, ABAN and Ina-Ban¹⁹ have a vital role to play in ROCA.²⁰

ROCA is just one example of the potential of virtual networks and channels of communication. The formation in 2009 of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN) has proved to be of immense importance. Examples of ABAN’s achievements are many:

- the development of video clips on asbestos in 10 Asian languages;

¹³ Kazan-Allen L. *Chrysotile asbestos: hazardous to humans, deadly to the Rotterdam Convention*. 2006. page 29-30. http://ibasecretariat.org/chrys_hazard_rott_conv_06.pdf

¹⁴ Lemen R. *Chrysotile Asbestos as a Cause of Mesothelioma*. Int J Occup Environ Health 2004;10:233-239.

¹⁵ The Earth Negotiations Bulletin Vol. 15 No. 100 Page 2, reported one of the IBAS interventions as follows: “During discussion on how to reflect the lack of consensus on chrysotile asbestos in the INC-11 report, INTERNATIONAL BAN ASBESTOS SECRETARIAT said that the comments of all delegates on the issue of chrysotile asbestos should be included in the report so that asbestos victims know the positions of their countries’ delegations on this issue.” <http://www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb15100e.pdf>

¹⁶ http://ibasecretariat.org/chrys_hazard_rott_conv_06.pdf

¹⁷ The Rotterdam Convention Alliance is an “Alliance of Environmental, Labour and Health organizations around the world working to promote the full and effective implementation of the Rotterdam Convention.” See: http://ibasecretariat.org/cop4_dossier.php

¹⁸ The fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Rotterdam Convention (COP 5) will be held in Geneva, Switzerland, from 20-24 June 2011.

<http://www.pic.int/home.php?type=b&id=171&sid=27&tid=41>

¹⁹ In the years 2005-2009, Indonesia used 305,511 tonnes of asbestos. In 2009, Indonesia’s use of 82,302 tonnes of asbestos made it the world’s 6th largest user.

²⁰ On October 11, 2010, news was received that the documents needed for the accession by Russia to the Rotterdam Convention have been sent to the State Parliament. Although Russian observers have participated boisterously in previous Convention meetings, Russian membership would entitle it to take part in Convention negotiations. It is likely that, as before, actions by Russia would be aimed at blocking the listing of chrysotile. See: <http://www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb15100e.pdf> page 2.

- ABAN participation in or sponsorship of meetings in India, Thailand, Italy, Malaysia, Belgium, UK, Korea, Indonesia, Japan;
- ABAN events to mark the visit by the Quebec Premier to India in 2010;
- protests in 10 countries by ABAN members in June and July 2010 on Quebec Day and Canada Day;
- press release regarding potential investment from India and the UK for the Jeffrey Asbestos Mine, Quebec.

The launch in October 2010 of a new campaigning group in Indonesia – Ina-Ban – is the latest example of the collaborative spirit which is propelling forward the ban asbestos campaign in Asia. IBAS welcomes this new group and pays tribute to founding members whose energy, enthusiasm and hard work have been crucial to Ina-Ban's formation.

The Future?

While our commitment to the objective of banning asbestos remains firm, financial and time constraints mean that our priorities must be clearly delineated. To this end, IBAS will continue to work with grassroots campaigners on asbestos initiatives. Considering that teenagers in asbestos-consuming countries could one day become victims of asbestos-related diseases, IBAS proposes to develop an outreach project aimed at younger people. To this end, in 2011 we would like to work with groups in Indonesia, India and Brazil on the planning of a competition to generate asbestos awareness amongst high school and college students. This project could make use of new technology as well as traditional methods of communication. Prizes, funded by IBAS, would be awarded by grassroots groups to the schools of the winning competitors and runners up. Should the results of the pilot scheme prove satisfactory, this competition could be run in other asbestos-using countries in 2012.

To stimulate national asbestos debates, we propose consulting grassroots groups on the publication in 2011/2012 of a monograph entitled: *Global Asbestos Hotspots*. An investigation of the current situation in major asbestos consuming and producing countries would provide a valuable resource for campaigners in their discussions with legislators, journalists, grassroots, consumers and citizens' groups. And finally, with an eye on the June 2011 meeting of the Rotterdam Convention, we need to ensure that the voice of asbestos victims is heard. Consultation on how this is best achieved is urgent.

Concluding Thoughts

In the last 10 years, the efforts of the ban asbestos network have been spectacularly successful. Working together we have:

- mounted asbestos conferences, workshops, seminars and events on six continents;
- produced leaflets, literature and video material in dozens of languages;
- developed an authoritative counter voice to asbestos industry vested interests;
- established a respected online profile;
- engaged with social partners to progress a dialogue with international agencies and national authorities.

In this time we have learned some invaluable lessons:

- no one ever gave asbestos victims anything they didn't fight for;
- wherever rights have been obtained, they will be attacked;
- victims, their families and communities play a vital role in the campaign to ban asbestos;
- we are stronger together than we are apart.