



Union Aid Abroad APHEDA
The global justice organisation of the Australian union movement



ABREA

Associação Brasileira dos Expostos ao Ambiente



PRESS RELEASE

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Asbestos Technology, Unsustainable & Unacceptable: Official

Actions taken by international organizations over the last week have signaled increasing awareness that business as usual is no longer a sustainable option in light of the climate emergency. The United Nations Human Rights Council – the UN’s main human rights body – and the International Labor Organization – the organization tasked with protecting workers worldwide – have called for a drastic rethink on the way life is lived in the 21st century.

On October 8, 2021, by a vote of 43-0 with four abstentions, the Human Rights Council passed a resolution recognizing the right to live a life free from environmental hazards and appointing a special rapporteur to monitor “how the adverse effects of climate change, including sudden and slow onset disasters, affect the full and effective enjoyment of human rights.”¹

According to Sugio Furuya, Coordinator of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN), this resolution will be of “immense benefit” to campaigners working to end the use of asbestos in Asia:

“Global recognition of the human right to breathe clean air and drink fresh water reinforces calls on governments to ban the use of asbestos, a class 1 carcinogen. It is no surprise that three out of the four abstentions to the vote on this resolution were from the asbestos stakeholding countries of Russia, China & India. I am ashamed to say that the 4th abstention was from the Government of Japan, which is yet to give an adequate explanation for its betrayal of international efforts to protect the planet.

Information reported by participants at the September 2021 virtual ABAN conference documented the serious consequences of asbestos use in Asian countries experiencing a growing number of extreme weather disturbances due to climate change. With more storms of escalating severity, clean-up operations have become increasingly complex due to asbestos contamination caused by physical damage to the built environment.”

The same day as the UN Human Rights Council acted to recognize the right of human beings to live a life free from exposures to deadly toxins, the International Labor Organization (ILO), adopted a code of practice on safety and health for industrial sectors in which more than sixty million people work. According to an ILO release, the new code “provides comprehensive and practical advice on how to eliminate, reduce and control all major hazards and risks. This includes chemical substances, ergonomic and physical hazards, tools, machines and equipment, as well as building and fire safety.”

Commenting on this development, Kate Lee of Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA said:

“This news has given a boost to trade unions and labor organizations campaigning to secure the universal right to earn a living in safe and secure conditions. The workplace injustices exposed by the pandemic and the devastating consequences of climate change must be addressed by prioritizing greener products, cleaner working practices and sustainable technologies. The

¹ *Clean environment is a human right, UN council agrees.* October 8, 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/08/clean-environment-is-a-human-right-un-council-agrees>

continuing use of asbestos is not compliant with either the ethos or the provisions of the new guidelines.”²

Occupational health and safety must be given the status of a fundamental right by the ILO, alongside the existing fundamental rights: freedom of association, collective bargaining and protection from discrimination, forced labour and child labour. It is expected this will happen at the ILO Conference in June 2022. Bernhard Herold from Solidar Suisse pointed out in this context that:

“making occupational health and safety a fundamental ILO right will also increase the accountability of governments and employers to stop the use of all forms of asbestos, including chrysotile, worldwide. It will mean that the continued use of asbestos will constitute a human rights violation.”

In just over a fortnight, COP26 – the 26th United Nations Climate Change conference – will take place in Glasgow under the Presidency of the UK, the country which pioneered and progressed the industrial use of asbestos for well over a century.³ As a consequence, the UK now has the world’s highest incidence of the asbestos cancer mesothelioma and more than 5,000 people die every year from asbestos exposures experienced in their homes, at work or at school.

“The aspiration expressed by UK leaders to address the climate emergency and, at the same time, ‘build back better, and greener’ is one we all share,” said Laurie Kazan-Allen, Coordinator of the London-based International Ban Asbestos Secretariat. “Prohibiting asbestos use and eradicating the asbestos hazard from national infrastructures are fundamental parts of this scenario. The future is asbestos-free!”

Notes for Editors

1. For more information, please contact: Sugio Furuya (ABAN) by email at 2009aban@gmail.com or WhatsApp +81 8030246210.
2. Information about the groups which issued this press release can be accessed at:
 - Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN)
Website: <http://anroev.org/aban>
 - `Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA
Website: <https://www.apheda.org.au/>
 - Solidar Suisse
Website: <https://solidar.ch/en/>
 - Associação Brasileira dos Expostos ao Amianto (ABREA)
[Brazilian Association of Asbestos Victims]
Website: <http://www.abrea.org.br>
 - International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS)
Website: <http://ibasecretariat.org>

² ILO. *ILO adopts code of practice on safety and health in textiles, clothing, leather and footwear industries*. October 8, 2021.

https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_822368/lang--en/index.htm

³ COP26 Explained.

<https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>