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Over 300 scientists and health defenders from 36 countries condemn dangerous misinformation being disseminated in India by asbestos industry organisations

In a letter released today, over 200 scientists and over 100 labour and health organizations from 36 countries strongly condemned efforts by asbestos industry organisations to promote use of chrysotile asbestos in India. The letter, sent to Health Minister Sh Gulam Nabi Azad, Labour Minister Sh Sis Ram Ola and Environment Minister Ms Jayanthi Natarajan, noted that the asbestos industry is on a mission to enhance its profits and urged the National Government of India to put the health of the Indian population ahead of the vested interests of the asbestos industry.

“The International Chrysotile Association and the Asbestos Cement Products Manufacturers’ Association of India (ACPMA) are disseminating deadly, deceptive misinformation about chrysotile asbestos, that will cause suffering and loss of life for years to come,” said Dr. Joseph LaDou, Emeritus Chair, Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, University of California School of Medicine, USA.

“These organisations claim that scientific research shows that chrysotile asbestos can be safely used,” said Professor Luiz Augusto Facchini, Department of Social Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Brazil. “This claim is utterly false. The International Agency for Research on Cancer and the World Health Organization, as well as numerous other scientific organisations, have all called for an end to the use of chrysotile asbestos in order to prevent further tragic epidemics of asbestos-related diseases.”

“While a handful of scientists financed by and allied to the asbestos industry, deny the health risks of chrysotile asbestos and promote its continued used, not a single reputable scientific body in the world supports this position,” said Dr. Fernand Turcotte, Professor Emeritus of Preventive Medicine and Public Health, Laval University, Québec, Canada.

In the face of the public health disaster caused by asbestos, 54 countries have banned any use of asbestos. The asbestos industry, in order to ensure its continued profits, is aggressively targeting Asian countries for sales. Just six Asian countries – China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and Sri Lanka – now represent 70% of world asbestos consumption.

India imports more asbestos than any other country in the world, with imports having risen from 253,382 tons in 2006 to 473,240 tons in 2012, an increase of 186%. “These vast amounts of asbestos, being placed in homes and schools across India, are a deadly time bomb that will go on causing suffering and deaths for decades to come,” said Dr V. Murlidhar, Pneumoconiosis compensation board, TN Trust, UK and Trauma surgeon, Mumbai, India.

As a result of increased use of asbestos in Asia, asbestos experts, Dr. G.V. Le and Dr. K. Takahashi have warned: “A surge of Asbestos Related Disorders (ARD) in Asia should be anticipated in the coming decades. Asian countries should not only cease asbestos use but also prepare themselves for an impending epidemic of ARD.”

One of the 'eminent' speakers at the forthcoming industry conference, Dr David Bernstein was found by a New York court early this year to have committed potential crime-fraud by billing per hour to publish papers in the scientific literature that were financed and controlled by an asbestos products company.¹

The independence of a 2012 study conducted by the National Institute of Occupational Health titled 'Health hazards/ environmental hazards resulting from use of Chrysotile variety of asbestos in the country' commissioned by the Ministry of Chemicals and Petrochemicals was tarnished by the participation of the asbestos industry behind the scenes.

Commenting on the study, Dr Arthur Frank, Professor of Public Health, Drexel University, USA stated: "There are so many things wrong with this study it is hard to know where to begin. Perhaps the single most damning statement in the whole document is to be found on page 106 - *All workers were using personal protective equipment device such as a piece of cloth as mask*. Who could possibly believe that a piece of cloth acts as a piece of protective equipment for microscopic Asbestos dust?"

"It shows cynical indifference on the part of the asbestos industry that they are holding their event to promote a toxic product on the anniversary of the Bhopal tragedy," said Pralhad Malvadkar, Occupational Health and Safety Centre, Mumbai. "The millions of tons of asbestos that are being placed in homes and schools in India will create thousands of innocent victims, while this irresponsible industry reaps the profits. A slow motion Bhopal is being created. It may be reliably predicted that the toll of death and disease from asbestos in India will be at least 10 to 100 times as great as that from the disaster in Bhopal. The corporate mentality that is the cause is the same in both cases".

We call on the three government ministers to reject the discredited propaganda of a tainted, irresponsible industry and instead show leadership that respects reputable science and protection of health.

We call on the national government to adopt an enlightened policy and to support the WHO's recommendation to end all use of asbestos in India.

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¹Ruling of the New York Court http://ibasecretariat.org/nyc_appellate_court_ruling_jun_6_2013.pdf

NOTES:

- On December 3 and 4, the International Chrysotile Association, which promotes the interests of the global asbestos industry, and the Asbestos Cement Product Manufacturers' Association of India, will be holding a conference in New Delhi to promote use of chrysotile asbestos in India.
- While there is no systematic monitoring and reporting of asbestos related diseases (ARD) in India, evidence of cases of Mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer found in people exposed to all forms of asbestos fibres, and cases of asbestosis have been recorded.
- 225 cases of Mesothelioma have been reported by the Indian cancer registry, the Gujarat Cancer Institute and the Tata Cancer Institute. Independent studies in Mumbai, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand of former asbestos product manufacturing factory/mine workers have identified over 500 cases of asbestosis, some of whom have also been compensated for contracting Asbestos related Disorders (ARDs) due to work related exposure. New data being collected by independent health organisations show diseases amongst family members of workers due to secondary and environmental exposures. Several legal cases are pending in labour and civil courts in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.
- Representations have been made to the Competition Commission of India (CCI) against ACPMA, asking it to take punitive action against the Association for misrepresenting the safety of chrysotile on its website. This includes having out-dated advice from the WHO and ILO.
- A 2012 study conducted by National Institute of Occupational Health titled 'Health hazards/ environmental hazards resulting from use of Chrysotile variety of asbestos in the country' commissioned by Ministry of Chemicals and Petrochemicals and part sponsored by the asbestos industry was used by the government of India early this year to oppose the inclusion of chrysotile asbestos in the Prior Informed Consent list of Rotterdam convention. A RTI request filed with the Ministry of Chemicals reveals active 'association' of ACPMA in the study and participation of its members in the review meetings of the study.
- India's Asbestos Time Bomb (Published by International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS)) http://ibasecretariat.org/india_asb_time_bomb.pdf
- Charting the Changing Pattern of Asbestos Production and Use 1950-2012 (Source IBAS - http://ibasecretariat.org/graphics_page.php)
- Video Download – Experts Speak Out (Source IBAS - http://www.ibasecretariat.org/video_downloads_experts.php)