

Not yet Banned

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THE WORLD HEALTH organisation (WHO) estimates some 107,000 workers die annually from asbestos-related diseases, out of 125 million people who encounter it in the workplace.

The European Union, Australia, Japan, South Korea and an increasing number of countries have outlawed it, according to London-based NGO International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS).

The asbestos industry paid US\$70 billion over four decades in damages and litigation costs in the USA, where asbestos is regulated but not banned, according to the Washington, D.C.-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).

But despite the ban, asbestos is still an important component of the construction and manufacturing industries, said Sugio Furuya, coordinator of the Tokyo-based Asia Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN).

"In fact, Asia and the Middle East consume the asbestos that is not used elsewhere any more," he added.

"Our main worries are China, India and Russia, that account for 60% of world asbestos consumption and have very little regulation over its use," added Laurie Kazan-Allen, IBAS coordinator. "Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Uzbekistan and Sri Lanka are also consuming a lot and without a tight legal framework."

Asbestos is used to produce wall coverings, roofing plates, water pipes, heat conservation and insulation material.

In studies from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, at least one case of mesothelioma occurred for every 170 tons of asbestos used.

Based on this internationally accepted formula, Asia and the Middle East's current asbestos consumption would lead to 8,000 mesothelioma cases annually.

Tons of asbestos used in Asia and Middle East is rising, while plummeting elsewhere based on US Geological Survey data from 1998-2010. An incurable form of cancer, mesothelioma can lay dormant for decades before turning fatal and is stealthy in its transmission. "It [exposure] can also be indirect, like a woman who regularly washed the asbestos-impregnated clothes of her husband," said Domyung Paek, professor of occupational and environmental medicine at Seoul University.

Other asbestos-related diseases include cancer of the lungs, larynx and ovaries and asbestosis (when lung tissue becomes fibrous).

Not all asbestos is deadly, according to the Canadian government-backed Chrysotile Institute (CI), an asbestos industry association which says the only kind still used today (white asbestos or chrysotile) is safe.

"Chrysotile, is a valuable material. It is cheap and long-lasting," said Clement Godbout, president of CI. "And if you follow safe use procedures, health effects are trivial, if any... The alternatives to asbestos are much more expensive."

But WHO has noted all forms of asbestos are carcinogenic and potentially fatal depending on exposure.

"Asbestos is the first cause of work-related diseases and the second most carcinogenic substance in the environment [after tobacco] in industrialized countries. The asbestos lobby has, however, been able to delay any legal measure by several decades. That is why civil society movements in Asia must be watchful." said Kazan-Allen of IBAS.

"Productivity requirements in the construction industry in Asia are too high. There is no way to use asbestos safely. The long-term public health costs will offset any economy made today," said Seoul University's Paek.

In 2010, almost half of asbestos production was in Russia (49%). Other big producers were China (20%), Brazil (13%), Kazakhstan (10%), and Canada (5%). Most of it was used in China (29%), India (17%), Russia (14%), Kazakhstan (7%), Brazil (7%), Indonesia (5%), Uzbekistan (5%), Thailand (4%), Vietnam (4%), Ukraine (3%), Sri Lanka (2%) and Iran (1%).

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