

Canada accused of hypocrisy over asbestos exports

Although Canada will not expose its own citizens to asbestos, its plans to continue exporting the deadly substance to developing countries has drawn widespread condemnation. Tony Kirby reports.



Asbestos is a lethal and naturally occurring group of minerals that has brought death and misery to people worldwide. Due to its good tensile strength and resistance to damage, asbestos became extremely popular throughout the early 20th century, and, in many less wealthy nations, remains so today, where it has several uses including strengthening cement and prolonging the life of road surfaces.

Once the link between asbestos and lung disease and cancer was proven beyond doubt, high-income countries began phasing out its use and removing it from buildings. Despite this, WHO estimates that about 125 million people worldwide remain exposed to asbestos in the workplace. More than 107 000 people die each year from asbestos-related lung cancer, mesothelioma (a specific form of lung cancer), and asbestosis resulting from occupational exposures. One in every three deaths from occupational cancer is estimated to be caused by asbestos.

Mesothelioma is termed a time-bomb because symptoms often occur several decades after exposure. Asbestos fibres penetrate the lungs, and can lead to cancer. Cases of mesothelioma continue to rise in many high-income countries, because most exposure occurred during the 1960s and 1970s before the dangers were evident. In the UK, the mesothelioma death toll has increased from 895 in 1990 to 2249 in 2008. It could be a decade before cases begin to fall again. In Canada, deaths rose from 153 in 1984 to 386 in 2007, though the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* notes that "the number of cases is likely underestimated owing to diagnostic, coding and registration challenges specific to mesothelioma".

Canada is actively removing asbestos from its buildings, and has a de-facto

ban on using the substance in any form in all but exceptional circumstances. But unlike other rich nations, Canada has been a major exporter of chrysotile, or white asbestos. It was the world's fourth biggest exporter (behind Russia, Kazakhstan, and Brazil) shipping about 150 000 tonnes per year to developing

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countries such as India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where little or no protection exists for workers or exposed populations. Asbestos-laden products such as piping, roofing, and cement are widely dispersed in developing countries and are cut, sawn, and hammered, with many workers not knowing that they contain asbestos or even what asbestos is. Canada has also vetoed attempts by WHO and the international community to include chrysotile in the Rotterdam Convention—a UN-sponsored list of controlled substances—which officially alerts importing nations to risks associated with that substance.

However, with readily accessible deposits of chrysotile in Quebec dwindling, Canada's exports seemed to be at an end. That was until an Indian consortium, led by Montreal-based financier Baljit Chadha, put in a bid to convert the recently closed Jeffrey Mine from an open pit to an underground operation. This would see production and exports run for another 25 years, boosting yearly output to a maximum of 260 000 tonnes—around 10% of global production. It would also secure 500 jobs for miners and others. The Quebec Government, led by Jean Charest, is considering providing a \$US57 million loan guarantee to the

project. A spokesperson for the Quebec Government confirmed the matter was under consideration, and that the government required an economic partner to go ahead. She added that there must be a guarantee both of profitability and that the operators will "follow the rules of safe use of chrysotile effective in Canada".

Protests are taking place this week in London, Quebec, and Asian cities led by groups that have long campaigned for a global ban on all asbestos. On Dec 9, a coalition of UK anti-asbestos groups will protest against the reopening of the Jeffrey Mine outside Canada House, London, UK. They will also hand a petition to the UK Government. The London protests were co-organised by Laurie Kazan-Allen, coordinator of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS). "For over a decade, we have been engaged in a David and Goliath battle with asbestos lobbyists, stakeholder governments and commercial interests. They maintain that asbestos can be used safely under controlled conditions, but we know this is wrong", says Kazan-Allen, who also produces the British Asbestos Newsletter. "A new asbestos mine in Quebec would be an abomination."

In Quebec, an Asian Delegation from affected importing countries (including Indonesia, India, Korea, and Japan) has this week held a number of public events and press conferences across the province. "Many Asian countries have poor or non-existent asbestos regulations in workplaces, and those that exist are poorly enforced", says Sugio Furuya, coordinator of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN) and Secretary General of the Japan Occupational Safety and Health Resource Centre. "It is not only workers and the public, but also government officials and politicians that are unaware

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of the hazards of this deadly material." In a letter to Premier Charest, Furuya says: "We believe it would make more sense, would avoid harming people overseas and would avoid bringing dishonour on Quebec's reputation, for the Quebec government to invest the \$57 million in creating alternative economic development in the mining community and to assist the remaining 250 miners in the town of Asbestos." Charest has declined to meet the delegation personally.

"It is always easier to do harm to people if you don't have to look them in the face", says Kathleen Ruff, Canadian anti-asbestos campaigner, author of *Exporting Harm: How Canada Exports Asbestos to the Developing World*, and senior human rights adviser to the Rideau Institute—an independent research and advocacy organisation in Ottawa, ON. Asbestos campaigners worldwide are appalled at the Canadian and Quebec Governments' refusal to accept advice from public health and medical organisations, including the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and Canadian Cancer Society, that asbestos in all forms is deadly and that exporting asbestos-related death and disease to developing countries is an abhorrent practice that must end. "If governments in Canada recognise that restrictions and regulations are essential to protect our citizens from the devastating effects of this hazardous product, why do they allow asbestos to be exported to other countries that may lack the resources to protect their own citizens?" asks CMA president Jeff Turnbull. "We have a social responsibility to protect not only the

health of Canadians but that of citizens elsewhere who are being harmed by a Canadian export. Canada should not be abdicating this responsibility", he adds.

Health, trade union, and environmental groups have placed advertisements in newspapers across Canada condemning Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's "killer legacy" of asbestos exports. "Both the Canadian and Quebec governments have instead supported the stance by the Chrysotile Institute that chrysotile can be used safely with all the appropriate safeguard", says Ruff. "Sadly, this so-called independent organisation is part-funded by the asbestos industry, and one of its directors—Bernard Coulombe—is president of the Jeffrey Mine. The Chrysotile Institute pretends to be a non-profit scientific organisation, but in fact lobbies for the asbestos industry and puts out false, deceptive, phoney science. It reminds me of tobacco-industry backed research saying tobacco is safe."

Until recently, asbestos exportation was the elephant in the room in Canadian politics that no party was brave enough to take on, due to industry opposition. The groundswell of opinion has now convinced the country's Liberal and Social Democrat parties to support a ban—but Harper's Conservatives remain opposed. Ruff has also called on the Canadian Labour Congress—the body to which most trade unions are affiliated—to come out more vocally in support of a ban.

Canada's stance has not gone unnoticed by other developed nations. In the UK Parliament, Jim Sheridan MP recently asked Minister of State for International Development, Alan Duncan MP, for assurances that UK assistance to improve health standards in developing countries is not being compromised by mining in Quebec. Duncan said that the UK Government was "totally opposed to use [of asbestos] anywhere, and would deplore its supply to developing countries", adding that "Canadian exportation of asbestos is a cause for concern."

While refusing to condemn Canada directly, Maria Neira, Director of WHO's Department of Public Health and The Environment said that "WHO's position is extremely clear: that all forms of asbestos are carcinogenic to humans. WHO would be very happy to see as many countries as possible phase out asbestos. It has been clearly identified as a public health risk."

Canada's health minister Leona Aglukkaq refused to answer questions from *The Lancet* on why her government had ignored requests from anti-asbestos campaigners to end all exports, and failed to revise federal government regulations to say that there is no safe exposure level to any form of asbestos. But the Canadian Natural Resources Minister Christian Paradis confirmed the government's position remains unchanged, namely that the risks associated with the use of chrysotile can be managed under controlled conditions. "The Government of Canada does not provide direct financial assistance to the chrysotile industry", says Paradis. "Since 1979, the Government of Canada has promoted the controlled use of chrysotile on the national and international scene. It continues to do so through the Chrysotile Institute, a not-for-profit organisation established in 1984 by the Governments of Canada and Quebec, labour and industry." Paradis refused to answer questions on the morality of asbestos exports to developing nations, but a spokesman for Charest insisted most chrysotile exports are used in cement products and that only foreign companies that agree to adhere to safe use can receive exports.

"It's not too late for the Quebec Government to change its mind and deny the loan guarantee", concludes Ruff. "They must set an example to the other asbestos exporters worldwide. If this mine re-opens, the Canadian and Quebec Governments will have blood on their hands for generations to come."

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