

## **Asbestos kills Europeans, Australians and Japanese but not Indians**

Asbestos has been banned in almost 40 countries, which includes Australia, Uruguay, European Union, Honduras and others. Currently, Japan has also banned asbestos use, except in cases where there are no substitutes. But as per the Indian Bureau of Mines (IBM), asbestos is safe for Indian workers and citizens.

The adverse impact of asbestos use has been further established with major Japanese manufacturers having admitted scores of asbestos-related deaths amongst former employees, customers and local people. But the extent of the human tragedy due to asbestos exposure remains uncovered in India.

This is despite the fact that the Union Ministry of Health informed the Parliament in 2003 that studies by the National Institute of Occupational Health, Ahmedabad, have shown that exposure to any type of asbestos can lead to the development of asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

White asbestos continues to be in use in India although other kinds such as blue and brown asbestos are banned. About one lakh (0.1 million) workers are directly exposed and 3 crore (30 million) construction workers are being subjected to asbestos dust on a day-to-day basis. Besides the workers, even common citizens are at risk.

Asbestos is used mainly for water pipes or as roofing sheets in the construction industry. It is also used in the manufacture of pressure and non-pressure pipes used for water supply, sewage, irrigation and drainage system in urban and rural areas, asbestos textiles, laminated products, tape, gland packing, packing ropes, brake lining and jointing used in core sector industries such as automobile, heavy equipment, petro-chemicals, nuclear power plants, fertilisers, thermal power plants, transportation, defence, etc.

### **Japanese scenario**

On June 29, 2005, a spokesperson for Kubota Corporation, an industrial equipment manufacturer based in Osaka, Japan confirmed the asbestos deaths of scores of former employees. Kubota Executive Taichi Ito told reporters, "We followed laws and regulations properly (at that time), but it is extremely regrettable that the health of local residents was harmed." The next day, officials at the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry announced their intention to look into the labour conditions, which led to these deaths. The news about the death of 86 former employees of Nichias Corporation due to asbestos-related disease since 1976 attracted media attention throughout Japan on July 5, 2005. There are several other Japanese companies, which have recently disclosed asbestos deaths amongst their workforce.

Currently, Japan has banned asbestos use in principle, except in cases where there are no substitutes. Asbestos is, therefore, still used in gaskets for machinery, insulating plates on switchboards, seals at chemical plants and ropes for industrial use.

Responding to the recent factual reports of asbestos related deaths, Japanese Health Ministry plans to ban all use of asbestos by 2008.

### **Indian scenario**

Even as Japan announced a set of measures to ease public anxiety about asbestos, plans are afoot in India to lift the ban on asbestos mining. Asbestos is being promoted freely whereas developed countries keep away from it.

Asbestos fibres are proven to be carcinogenic. The Indian Government's signal to promote asbestos has outraged environmental, labour, consumer and human rights groups in the country. Grants of fresh mining leases and renewal of existing mining leases for asbestos are presently banned in India on health grounds but the Union Ministry of Commerce continues to import asbestos from countries like Canada. In Canada, there is a no home use policy for asbestos. It has lost its case in World Trade Organisation (WTO) where it argued for trade in white asbestos.

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Unmindful of the fact that 'poison' does not become 'non-poisonous' as a result of advertising, public relations campaigns and dubious scientific studies, the Canadian Government has announced its continuing support for safe and responsible use of white asbestos. It renewed its funding to the Montreal-based Asbestos Institute for the promotion of white asbestos throughout the world. It has announced a contribution of \$775,000 for the promotion of asbestos. Consequently, the asbestos industry has flooded national dailies and channels with sponsored features, advertisements and studies to promote what it calls the 'safe' and 'controlled use' of white asbestos cement.

### **Status of asbestos in Government records**

According to National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH), Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India exposure to asbestos causes asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

In India, the total use of asbestos is 1.25 lakh tonnes, out of which a more than 1.0 lakh tonne is being imported. Significant occupational exposure to asbestos occurs mainly in asbestos cement factories, asbestos textile industry and asbestos mining and milling. NIOH has carried out studies in all these industries and generated baseline data. Following is the summary of these studies:

#### *Asbestos cement factories*

There are 18 asbestos cement factories located in different parts of the country. NIOH

carried out environmental epidemiological studies in four asbestos cement factories located in Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Coimbatore and Mumbai. The prevalence of asbestosis in these factories varied from 3 to 5 per cent.

### *Asbestos textile industry*

Making of asbestos yarn and ropes is done mostly in the unorganised sector of industries with very poor safety measures. The prevalence of asbestosis was 9 per cent. This relatively low prevalence of asbestosis despite high environmental levels was attributed to high labour turn over. Cases of asbestosis were observed in workers having less than 10 years exposure in contrast to the reported average duration of over 20 years.

The Industrial Toxicology Research Center, Lucknow, a body under Union Ministry of Science and Technology, has conducted detailed studies in the illegal mining and milling area of Rajasthan carried out Dr. Qamar Rahman. She has reported that workers in these illegal mines are exposed to very high asbestos fibre concentration at work places. They do not use gloves, masks and protective clothing. They use primitive manual way for grinding. "Clinical studies revealed prevalence of large number of cases of asbestosis. In some cases asbestosis was developing in less than five years. Under such alarming conditions lifting ban on asbestos mining would be a disaster for the workers," says Dr Rahman.

In a survey of U.P. Asbestos Limited, Mohanlalganj, Lucknow and Allied Nippon Pvt Ltd., Ghaziabad (U.P), lung function impairment was found to be higher in subjects exposed for more than 11 years. This was the result of a Central Pollution Control Board sponsored project entitled 'Human risk assessment studies in asbestos industries in India.'<sup>1</sup>

The Directorate General, Factory Advice and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI), Union Ministry Labour seems ignorant of these studies, which concluded that even in controlled conditions, asbestos workers continue to suffer and it made no material difference in their condition.<sup>2</sup>

### **Civil Society, Trade Unions and health experts seek ban on asbestos**

The Indian Association of Occupational Health had passed a resolution demanding an immediate ban on all the activities related to asbestos and its products on April 13, 2002.

On November 8, 2004, preventable but incurable diseases caused by asbestos were taken note of by the India's central trade unions who endorsed a resolution calling for its ban. P K Ganguli of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) said that at a time when there is a world wide movement to get asbestos banned and already the entire developed world has banned it, it was puzzling to note that Indian Government is planning to lift the ban. He warned that it would contribute to more cancer and occupational hazards among the workers in particular. "We demand that the government should desist from lifting the ban from mining of all forms of asbestos," Ganguli asserts.

The government has meanwhile reduced customs duties on asbestos. Earlier the import duty on asbestos from reduced from 110 per cent to 50 percent in 1992, thus reducing total import cost by 25-30 per cent. India has also been reducing the customs duty on asbestos fibre in recent years (from 78 per cent in 1995-96 to 25 percent in 1999-2000). Fifty per cent of the sales of asbestos cement are in the rural sector and 30 and 20 per cent in the industrial and urban sectors respectively.

The Union Minister of State for Coal and Mines, Dr. Dasari Narayana Rao in a written reply in the Lok Sabha on April 29, 2005 announced the possibility of lifting the ban on asbestos mining in the light of mining industry supported study of Indian Bureau of Mines.

### **Conclusion**

Besides workers, even common citizens are at a risk of exposure from asbestos, which becomes air borne through wind erosion and normal wear and tear. The epidemic of illness and death due to asbestos that is plaguing the developed countries with an estimated 30 deaths per day is being repeated in India. India is using asbestos in exactly the same way as the developed countries did until about 1980. The danger from asbestos was documented in India as early as 1968. Although there is indisputable evidence that asbestos causes asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, asbestos mining, milling and manufacturing continues.

The result of widespread use of asbestos in the European countries, United States, Canada and others has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and over a trillion dollars in personal and property damage. But instead of learning anything from the experience, in order to remain in business the asbestos companies from the developed world have moved most of their operations to countries such as India where there is little awareness about the hazards from asbestos.

The choice before the Indian Government is crystal clear - either it should ban trade, manufacture and use of all kinds of asbestos or misinform the citizens that asbestos kills Japanese, Australians and Europeans but not Indians.

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### **Reference**

1 Reported in the Annual Report of Industrial Toxicology Research Centre (2001-2002), India

2 [http://www.dgfasli.nic.in/newsletter/jan\\_march\\_96.pdf](http://www.dgfasli.nic.in/newsletter/jan_march_96.pdf)