

Asbestos in Lebanon

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Seminar on Asbestos
21 May 1998, Beit-Mery, Lebanon

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Greenpeace thanks Canadian ambassador Mr. Daniel Marchand for allowing me to voice Greenpeace's opinion on the need to ban asbestos. We respect the ambassador because of his openness and because he has uncovered the case of a container of hazardous waste illegally exported from Canada to Lebanon in 1996. This issue is at the top of his agenda and Mr. Marchand informed Greenpeace that the container will be returned to Canada in the near future after all bureaucratic procedures are finished.

Regarding asbestos: All scientists and the World Health Organisation (WHO) agree that inhaling asbestos is dangerous and causes lethal lung diseases like cancer. The WHO said in a statement on 26 July 1986: "Epidemiological studies, mainly on occupational groups, have established that human exposure to all types of asbestos fibres ... is associated with such diseases as ... asbestosis, bronchial carcinoma, and ... mesothelioma".

The asbestos industry has been wasting money to greenwash its image by claiming that there is a so-called "good" white asbestos (chrysotile) and "bad" blue asbestos. This is a myth that led to an embarrassment of many politicians and industrialists. Another source of growing embarrassment are industry claims that asbestos can be dealt with in a 100 per cent safe way. On the levels of alleged "safe levels" of asbestos exposure, the US Environmental Protection Agency, or US EPA, said: "There is no safe level of exposure known, therefore exposure to friable asbestos should be avoided... Scientists have not been able to develop a "safe" or threshold level for exposure to airborne asbestos."

Regarding asbestos in drinking Water: There is a controversy here. The WHO said that there is "no consistent evidence that ingested asbestos is hazardous to health" (10 September 1996). But the US EPA said in a 1990 report: "After weighting the available information, EPA believes that there is evidence of a strong casual relationship between asbestos exposure and gastrointestinal cancer excess... Evidence suggests that cancers in the esophagus, larynx, oral cavity, stomach, colon and kidney may be caused by ingesting asbestos."

This scientific evidence presented by the US EPA report (from the US EPA homepage in January 1998) includes the following:

- (1) A statistically significant increase in gastrointestinal cancer was found in 10 of 23 epidemiological studies;
- (2) a consistent relationship exists between increased gastrointestinal cancer risk and increased lung cancer risk;
- (3) it is biologically plausible that asbestos could be associated with these tumor sites because it is conceivable that the majority of fibers inhaled are cleared from the respiratory tract and subsequently swallowed, allowing the fibers to enter the gastrointestinal tract (additionally, fibers may be swallowed directly);
- (4) one study demonstrated some evidence of carcinogenicity in male rats fed diets containing intermediate range size chrysotile asbestos.

Pls. acknowledge that two Syrian government committees advised in 1996 against the use of asbestos cement pipes in drinking water systems because of "its negative impact to the health of people if used in drinking water projects... The use of such pipes all over the world has been decreasing for health reasons and fears that asbestos could enter the human body and cause cancer."

But let us copy officials and the asbestos industry by bluntly misinterpreting the WHO and assume that asbestos in drinking water is 100 per cent safe. Greenpeace has been campaigning for a ban on the use of asbestos in all applications like sewage pipes, roof panels and braking pads. The main

problem is at the source, that is in the factory, where any measures can never achieve a 100 security for workers and people living near factories using asbestos.

In 1989, the US EPA decided to ban the use of asbestos. The rule was to be implemented in three stages between 1990 and 1997. But in 1991, a US court struck down EPA's rule. This came in response to petitions filed by the Asbestos Institute which is represented in this seminar, and other groups. The US EPA did not seek to reverse the ban.

Despite this setback, the use of asbestos in industrial nations has declined dramatically due to increasing public concern, objections by workers, government regulations and mounting liabilities. As an example, asbestos consumption in the US dropped by 60 per cent between 1978 and 1982. Overall consumption of asbestos-cement in Europe declined 31 per cent from 1978 to 1982.

In the European Union (EU) asbestos has been banned in many production processes. France banned the production and use of asbestos products starting January 1, 1997. Sweden banned asbestos in 1982, Britain and Denmark in 1986, Italy in 1992, Germany in 1993 and Spain in 1994. The EU is now in the process of debating a full ban in all member states. Saudi Arabia banned on 19 January 1998 the import of asbestos and all asbestos-containing products. Three years ago, Saudi Arabia already stopped using asbestos in almost all applications, including water systems and roof panels, and restricted its use to sewage systems.

Sales nose diving in the Western world and stricter bans are bad news for the exporters of the killer fibre. The asbestos industry in Canada, Russia, Ukraine and other countries are reacting by desperately trying to export more of the killer fibre asbestos to developing nations where environmental and health concerns are not taken so seriously.

Pro-asbestos lobbyists know that the best available safety measures are extremely difficult to finance, implement and control in factories in developing nations. Instead of promoting asbestos they should help companies like Eternit in Lebanon to switch to alternatives such as vitrified clay pipes and High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE) plastic pipes. Greenpeace appeals to the honorable ministers attending this seminar not to fall in the asbestos trap, to learn from the tragic mistakes of Western countries and ban this killer fibre in all applications in Lebanon once and for all.

One stumbling block in banning asbestos in Lebanon is, however, the protocol signed between the Ministry of Environment and Eternit in March 1997 which allows the company to use asbestos. The non-scientific protocol gives the illusion that asbestos can be dealt with in a safe way. Eternit is not implementing the protocol fully and controls can be described as being anything but scientific. Greenpeace believes that the Lebanese Environment Ministry advisors and Lebanese scientists like Dr. Berge Hatjian have made a tragic mistake when they finalised the protocol without linking it to a gradual phase-out of asbestos.

An unknown number of people have died because of asbestos use in Lebanon. Neither the Health Ministry nor the Social Security Authority have released any data on this. Asbestos is reportedly killing 7,000 people every year in the EU, including 1,500 in France alone. US authorities said that due to historic occupational exposure to asbestos between 8,000 and 10,000 people die every year in the United States.

Greenpeace demands that Lebanon applies precautionary measures and act according to the philosophy: ban a dangerous product, especially when alternatives are available. The questions we must all ask are: How many more people have to die until the use of asbestos is banned in Lebanon and all over the world? Are officials willing to take that responsibility? Can officials and the asbestos industry in future tell the victims and their families that they did not know and that they were not warned?

One last remark: The day will come when in developing nations the victims of asbestos and their families will be free from political pressure and threats. Many industries will then be taken to court, like it is the case with the company Eternit in France.