



Canada's deadly trade in asbestos

by Mark Bourrie

Ottawa, March 25 -- Canada is starting work this summer on a billion dollar project to renovate its parliamentary buildings and cleanse them of asbestos, which has been found to cause cancer.

The project will take six years to complete but, in the meantime, Canadian government agents are still pushing exports of the fibre. Canada even has gone so far as to argue a challenge at the World Trade Organization that a proposed French ban on asbestos imports would be an illegal trade practice.

Despite recent warnings that asbestos was the cause of 500,000 cancer victims in western Europe alone, Canadian asbestos producers continue to promote and sell their fibre worldwide - especially to developing nations.

Asbestos is used as a binder in cement, as insulation, and in anti-fire walls. It is also a potent carcinogen with a long, well-documented legacy of death.

The danger comes when small asbestos fibres are released and inhaled by labourers. The fibres cause cancerous growths in the lungs, lung lining and abdomen but can take 20 years or more to manifest.

In 1997, Canada exported 430,000 tonnes of asbestos - more than 96% of production - most of it to the developing world. Canada is the world's second-largest exporter of asbestos after Russia.

Union activists, who have visited India and other developing countries say, however, that the public relations efforts of the government and the asbestos industry are simply window-dressing to hide the fact that most people who work with the natural mineral fibre risk cancer.

Critics of Canada's asbestos exports say the country is exporting death to protect the profits of a handful of companies and the jobs of 1,600 miners.

"What's the difference between land mines and asbestos?" asks Dr. Barry Castleman, author of a respected book on the danger of asbestos. "A key difference, of course, is that Canada doesn't export land mines."

At the heart of the issue is Canada's own precarious political situation. All of the asbestos mines in Canada are in Quebec, a predominantly French-speaking province with a separatist government.

Federal and provincial politicians are pushing asbestos exports to prove that they are successful at developing overseas markets, and are protective of Quebec workers. Critics of asbestos exports say the industry would probably be allowed to die if it was centred in any other part of the country.

"Personally, I believe this is all about Quebec politics," says Canadian Auto Workers Health and Safety director Cathy Walker. "The Canadian and Quebec governments are competing with one another to show just how prepared they all are to protect Quebec jobs."

The real costs will be borne by the developing world, she says.

Walker just returned from India, where she saw unprotected workers slashing open bags of asbestos fibres. In places where the asbestos was being mixed into cement, clouds of the carcinogenic fibres swirled around workers.

In Britain, the Cancer Research Campaign said in January that its study into the European asbestos-linked cancer epidemic should sound alarm bells everywhere, "particularly in the developing world where uncontrolled asbestos is still very common," said CRC director Gordon McVie.

Seven of Canada's top 10 markets are Third World countries. Still, the Canadian government, the asbestos industry and lobby groups are trying to put a good face on the asbestos industry.

Recently, diplomats stationed here were flown to asbestos-producing regions on an all-expense-paid first-class junket.

Journalists have been cultivated with similar perks.

Philip Landrigan, of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine - the centre that first linked cancer to asbestos in the 1960s - says the asbestos lobby's claim that the fibre is safe is "absolutely untrue."

"Asbestos remains an important cause of human illness," says Landrigan. "All forms of asbestos are carcinogenic, and that includes Canadian chrysotile."

Julian Peto, head of epidemiology at the University of London, who wrote the January study on the Euro-epidemic, says there's no safe way to use asbestos in developed nations. In developing nations, where there is little money for protective clothing and ventilation systems, workers are being poisoned by the thousands, he said.

"There is no way you can control it in Britain, let alone the third world," Peto says.

"The thing about building materials is that they are completely uncontrollable. They are often used casually, by not very skilful people, who break them and drill them and cut them in small parcels."

In Canada, people working with asbestos are forced to limit their exposure to the fibres. Consumer products that release asbestos fibres into the atmosphere are banned, and the sale of loose asbestos to consumers is prohibited under law.

However, most Canadian asbestos exports are of loose fibres, which are shipped in large reinforced paper bags.

Canadian asbestos producers say they're training foreign workers in the safe handling of asbestos, through the Asbestos Institute.

The institute, founded in 1984 by the federal and Quebec governments and the asbestos industry, has been the beneficiary of more than \$10 million in Canadian government funding.

Ten European Union members have banned asbestos. France, which banned it in 1997 for health reasons, now faces a Canadian challenge at the WTO. Canada argues the ban violates Canada's rights under international trade rules.

In a speech delivered last year before an audience of occupational health professionals from around the world who had gathered in Italy, Dr. Joseph LeDou of the University of California's Medical School attacked Canada's asbestos-promoting efforts.

LeDou said Canada was engaged in "the exploitation of ignorance and poverty" in Asia, Africa and Latin America." He accused Canadian policy makers of "setting up the developing world "for an epidemic of asbestos-related disease, the costs of which will fall on countries that can ill afford it."

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