

European Asbestos Conference: Policy, Health and Human Rights

Brussels Declaration – 23 Sept. 2005

Preamble

Asbestos remains the principal cause of occupational cancer among the workers in Europe. Asbestos products in European homes, commercial buildings and infrastructures and asbestos waste in our environment continue to cause unprecedented levels of diseases and mortality.

Year of Action

European labour groups, medical associations and international agencies have issued calls to make 2005-2006 the Year of Action on Asbestos. To this end, the participants to the European Asbestos Conference held in Brussels on September 22/23 2005 call on all European Institutions: mainly the European Parliament and the European Commission as well as The Council of Europe to devise and implement a European Asbestos Action Plan which would take:

Action on Prevention

To prevent future hazardous exposures, the following steps are recommended:

- rigorous enforcement of EU and national health and safety asbestos legislation;
- as with other carcinogens, all asbestos products should be labelled with a skull and crossbones; the use of the current “a” letter logo is unacceptable;
- introduction of mandatory asbestos audits of public buildings by 2007 and domestic residences by 2008; as well as all transport means (i.e.: ships, trains, planes) by 2008; introduction of EU legislation, including a certification scheme, for the regulation of the asbestos removal industry;
- introduction of guidelines for measuring asbestos soil contamination;
- research on safe methods for treating asbestos waste;
- the derogation which allows the use of asbestos in chlorine production should cease;
- the 2003 Directive should be strengthened by eliminating the concept of “sporadic and of low intensity exposure”. No exposure to asbestos is safe!

Action on Human Rights

Human rights and the abolition of the death penalty are core values of the EU. Yet, hundreds of thousands of Europeans are being deprived of their right to good health through hazardous asbestos exposures; in many cases, these exposures are tantamount to a death sentence. Action is needed to secure the basic right to work and live in a safe environment. The following steps are recommended:

- the reclassification of pleural plaques and some other asbestos conditions as “non-malignant disease” is required; the current categorization of these symptoms as benign is not an accurate reflection of their impact on patients’ health and employment options;
- the establishment of national registers of workers exposed to asbestos and of workers with an asbestos related disease ;
- the recognition of all work related asbestos diseases as occupational diseases in the framework of a harmonization of occupational disease compensation schemes in the European Union;
- the development of medical guidelines for the “best treatment” of asbestos-related diseases; the development and funding of a research program for the treatment and care of people with these diseases;
- the setting up of specific European or national funds or schemes financed by: companies involved in asbestos production through compulsory contributions and public authorities to grant assistance to all victims of occupational, environmental or domestic asbestos exposures ; the support of asbestos victims’ groups to mobilize and assist the injured;
- the relocation of non-EU companies to the EU to escape asbestos liabilities in their home countries should no longer be permitted;
- the setting up of a European research centre for the investigation and implementation of safe technology for the removal/cleaning of asbestos contaminated areas which are high risk activities.

Action on Double Standards

- The EU should support an international ban of asbestos by an ILO Convention or other global instrument and a just transition in developing countries;
- EU legislation should ban the use of asbestos by EU-based companies anywhere in the world; lack of compliance with this legislation should be punished by fines which could be distributed amongst foreign asbestos victims;
- Strategies for minimizing asbestos liabilities of global defendants are well-developed; the EU should work with other partners to establish an international fund to compensate asbestos victims of EU companies;
- The transfer of risk from Europe to developing countries is unacceptable. In particular, the ship-breaking of asbestos contaminated vessels such as Le Clemenceau in India violate both the Basel Convention and EU waste regulations: those rules should be rigorously applied and enforced;
- Good practice regarding the successful introduction of non-asbestos safe technology in Europe should be disseminated to countries which are still using asbestos;
- Finances from the European Social Fund should be made available to support the clean-up of asbestos contaminated areas
- EAC participants call for national actions on specific days like the 28th of April 2006, ***International Workers Memorial Day*** and the 14th of May, ***Memorial Day*** for asbestos victims in Belgium. In particular they recommend demonstrations in front of Canadian embassies;
- The European Union should promote an inquiry on: the present and past activities of asbestos multinationals and their corporate links;

- The European organisations involved in the campaign for a world asbestos ban should support the struggle of NGO's, trade unions and other organisations in developing countries against asbestos by providing them with information on: best practice, effective legislation, medical and technical issues; European bodies have an important contribution to make towards the development of international networks of cooperation and solidarity.

Furthermore

Asbestos affects a wide range of issues from occupational and public health to the environment to consumer affairs to medical research. It is therefore recommended that a person be designated to coordinate the EU Asbestos Action Plan.