

Platform News – Civil society organisations in Asia call for a global ban on asbestos, highlight dangers in shipbreaking

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Bangladesh Ban Asbestos Network officially launched with OSHE as secretariat



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– During the annual Asia Ban Asbestos Network meeting, Bangladeshi civil society organisations launched the Bangladesh Ban Asbestos Network (B-BAN) under the auspices of OSHE, the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation, a member organisation of the NGO Shipbreaking Platform. Anti-asbestos organisations, victims groups, researchers, and medical experts from all over Asia rallied in Dhaka, Bangladesh to demand a complete ban on the mining and the use of asbestos, which is still causing asbestos-related diseases (known as ARD) amongst workers and communities in Asia. Although asbestos has been prohibited in many industrialised countries, including the EU, there has not been a global ban on the killing fiber. As a result, the asbestos industry has now turned its focus on the developing countries, where it tries to convince governments that asbestos is safe, using the same baseless arguments it already put forward in European countries in the 1960s to promote its dangerous products.



To change this, Asian activists have been meeting for years inside the Asia Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN), which is the umbrella organisation that created the Bangladesh Ban Asbestos Network last week. The B-BAN secretariat will be located in OSHE's office. OSHE was founded in 2003 and focuses on workplace-related development issues. During last week's meeting, OSHE organised a panel discussion on the dangers of asbestos in the shipbreaking industry in Asia. India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are the three major shipbreaking destinations: 70% of all end-of-life vessels were broken there in 2012. The Chinese ship recycling industry also has serious issues with asbestos handling and disposal. The experts present at the meeting agreed that exposure to asbestos is a major threat for all industries involved in shipping, from shipbuilding, to ship repair, to shipbreaking. Participants from South Korea and Hong Kong, which are major shipbuilding and ship repair centres, said that they can now witness the devastating results of shipyard workers' exposure to asbestos years ago. In both places, they can see a steadily raising number of victims of different ARD, such as asbestosis and mesothelioma. In the shipbreaking yards in South Asia, neither the management nor the workers are aware of the dangers of asbestos. A recent study by the NGO Shipbreaking Platform on shipbreaking in Pakistan has shown that asbestos is removed by workers without them being protected. Asbestos is then dumped in unmarked sites behind the yards. A recent research by OSHE in the shipbreaking yards in Bangladesh argues that nearly none of the supervisors in the yards is aware of the dangers of asbestos. Therefore, no protective measures are taken there either. Moreover, there is hardly any medical data available about ARD caused by shipbreaking, as the workforce in the yards mainly consists of undocumented migrant workers and the yard owners are not legally required to ensure regular health checks. Pilot studies both in India and Bangladesh have shown asbestosis cases in the shipbreaking yards. However, the circumstances - a migrant workforce, no documentation of occupational diseases and yards that are not easily accessible to civil society and researchers – make it very difficult to reveal the whole picture. *“Asbestos-related diseases are hidden. They are not as dramatic as major industrial accidents and seldom make headlines”,* argued Patrizia Heidegger, Executive Director of the NGO Shipbreaking Platform. *“Death by occupational diseases is slow, invisible and painful. We want the governments in Asia to understand how harmful it is to import asbestos into their countries and what huge human*

costs the ARD will cause in the near future." The NGO Shipbreaking Platform and its member organisation demand that all end-of-life vessels need to carry an Inventory of Hazardous Materials (IHM) in which asbestos, a common material found in the structure of ships, is identified and quantified. The ship owners need to provide an IHM as a first basic step towards clean and safe recycling. Moreover, shipbreaking countries need to ensure safe asbestos removal and handling, storage and disposal if they import end-of-life vessels for breaking. Bangladeshi courts have ruled that all ships imported into the country need to be toxic free. Also, under European law it is forbidden to export asbestos from the EU Member States. *Photo above: copyright Ranobir Mitro Basunia*