

## ILO to promote global asbestos ban

*The International Labour Office (ILO) is to pursue a global ban on asbestos, the world's biggest ever industrial killer. The landmark decision came with the adoption of a resolution on 14 June 2006 at the ILO conference in Geneva and followed a high level union campaign. Rory O'Neill asked **Jukka Takala**, director of ILO's SafeWork programme, what ILO will now do to help make the world asbestos-free.*



**Hazards:** What is the ILO response to the asbestos resolution?

**Jukka Takala:** ILO will intensify its support to the existing campaigns related to asbestos and, in particular, on the elimination of the future use of asbestos, and asbestos - containing materials. As the French Minister of Labour, M. Larcher said, the ILO should have a campaign of its own to eliminate future use of asbestos, and properly manage asbestos in place today.

**Hazards:** How serious a problem is asbestos trade and use?

**Jukka Takala:** Every year some 2 million tons of asbestos is produced and taken to use worldwide, and some of it is even recycled, such as that in shipbreaking. While recycling of useful materials is important, recycling of hazards must be stopped immediately. All these asbestos problems continue to cause a massive global epidemic that is increasingly hitting the developing world, in addition to the industrialised countries. These developing economies do not have the means to protect themselves, have outdated policies and legislation, poor inspection systems, and lack of knowledge to tackle the problem. It has been estimated that every 170 tons of asbestos is responsible for one mesothelioma - a fatal cancer of the linings of the lungs - and for two lung cancers.

**Hazards:** The resolution calls on ILO to actively promote the elimination of all asbestos use. What is the ILO's timetable for achieving an end to the trade in/use of asbestos?

**Jukka Takala:** Unfortunately, we will see asbestos-related deaths still at the end of this century. The task is now to increase the number of countries that have already eliminated future asbestos use from the present 40 countries to at least 100 in the coming 10 years. This should certainly reduce the asbestos use radically. The priority order is to concentrate on the present biggest producers, importers, and users of any kind of asbestos.

**Hazards:** How important a priority for ILO is achieving an end to asbestos use/trade?

**Jukka Takala:** Personally, I think this has top priority. Asbestos is the most important single factor causing death and disability at work, some 100,000 fatalities a year. The most fundamental right at work is the right to life and health.

**Hazards:** Has ILO any targets for achieving the goal of an end to asbestos use?

**Jukka Takala:** Any serious campaign should have measurable targets and time limits, that is exactly what we were talking about in the discussion on the new Promotional Framework on Occupational Safety and Health. Member States should set up their own campaigns, deadlines and targets. ILO targets will be the summary of those.

**Hazards:** If there are no targets, when would ILO hope to see an end to the trade in/use of asbestos?

**Jukka Takala:** No targets, no indicators, no deadlines - will result in no progress. ILO should take this seriously. This means also that funding, resources and support is located for promotion of the elimination measures. One of the targets is to convince decision makers - in ILO and in member States - of the importance and urgency of the issue.

**Hazards:** What will be ILO's first measures to meet the requirements of the new resolution? What will it do and when? (guidance to governments/social partners; seminars; publications; other?)

**Jukka Takala:** ILO will have to make its own plans for setting up both global and national campaigns, identify responsible units and persons for such campaigns, prepare an implementation programme, implement the plan, and to follow up and continuously adjust and improve such implementation plans. The tools at the ILO's disposal are: standards and their national compliance, advocacy and awareness measures, knowledge management and information exchange, technical collaboration and international collaboration.

**Hazards:** The asbestos industry/lobby has been blocking the classification of chrysotile (white asbestos) alongside other forms of asbestos under the Rotterdam Convention's Prior Informed Consent (PIC) provisions. As ILO is a UN agency, is ILO going to take action to push for PIC listing of chrysotile, a measure that would complement the provisions of the resolution?

**Jukka Takala:** While ILO is not a member of other sister UN organisations and can be only an observer, we only have an indirect possibility to influence the PIC procedure. We think that, indeed, other organisations should follow ILO's footsteps and move forward. UNEP, WHO, IPCS, IOMC, and SAICM are all relevant fora for the ILO to take the message further.

**Hazards:** Critics will say stopping asbestos trade and use has implications for workers in the industry. What is ILO's response to this?

**Jukka Takala:** An efficient production facility - asbestos mine - can produce 200,000 tons of asbestos ready to use with a workforce of fewer than 1,000 workers. One worker produces more than 200 tons annually. Compare this to the figure above that says that every 170 tons of asbestos kills three users later on in the user chain - without recycling. Referring to the employment issue is not a credible justification to continue asbestos use, while the workers of asbestos mines and plants should be assisted and supported in finding other replacement jobs eg. in substitute safer materials production.

**Hazards:** The asbestos industry/lobby has previously claimed existing ILO measures (Conventions and Recommendations) support its "safe use" argument for continued asbestos trade. The resolution says this cannot happen. What will ILO do if the asbestos industry continues to claim ILO support for asbestos trade?

**Jukka Takala:** We will try to make sure that the Resolution will be known by all those who will use this argument. There is no "safe use" of asbestos. The ILO, however, will not have an "international labour inspection force" and we will have to rely on national enforcement, media, trade unions, and responsible employers to make sure that asbestos use will gradually disappear. A long journey but the Resolution is a good tool for that.

**Hazards:** Closing thoughts?

**Jukka Takala:** The lung cancer links of asbestos were tentatively raised in the ILO's first Encyclopaedia supplement: "Occupation and Health", in 1938. It has taken 68 years to come to the new ILO Resolution, and still there are a number of different views. This process should be speeded up to reduce the number of foreseen victims in future.

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## **The resolution in full**

*Resolution concerning Asbestos at the International Labour Conference 2006*

The General Conference of the International Labour Organisation,

Considering that all forms of asbestos, including chrysotile, are classified as known human carcinogens by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a classification restated by the International Programme for Chemical Safety,

Alarmed that an estimated 100, 000 workers die every year from diseases caused by exposure to asbestos,

Deeply concerned that workers continue to face serious risks from asbestos exposure, particularly in asbestos removal, demolition, building maintenance, ship breaking and waste handling activities,

Noting that it has taken three decades of efforts and the emergence of suitable alternatives for a comprehensive ban on the manufacture and use of asbestos and asbestos-containing products to be adopted in a number of countries.

Further noting that the objective of the Promotional Framework for Occupational safety and health Convention 2006 is to prevent occupational injuries, diseases and deaths.

**1. Resolves that:**

- a) the elimination of the future use of asbestos and the identification and proper management of asbestos currently in place are the most effective means to protect workers from asbestos exposure and to prevent future asbestos-related diseases and deaths; and
- b) the Asbestos Convention 1986 (no 162) should not be used to provide a justification for, or endorsement of, the continued use of asbestos.

**2. Requests the Governing Body to direct the International Labour Office to:**

- a) Continue to encourage Member States to ratify and give effect to the provisions of the Asbestos Convention 1986 (No. 162) and the Occupational Cancer Convention 1974 (No.139);
- b) to promote the elimination of future use of all forms of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials in all Member States
- c) promote the identification and proper management of all forms of asbestos currently in place;
- d) encourage and assist member States to include measures in their national programmes on occupational safety and health to protect workers from exposure to asbestos, and
- e) transmit this resolution to all member States

*Source: [www.hazards.org](http://www.hazards.org)*