



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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CAP Submits Memorandum Calling for Outright Ban on Asbestos

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister and relevant Ministries and agencies on 22 July 2024, renewing our call for an outright ban on all forms of asbestos. CAP made a similar call to ban asbestos through a memorandum submitted in May 2001 and subsequent demands via letters, discussions and consultations with various authorities.

Asbestos is a group of naturally occurring silicate minerals composed of long, thin fibres, with different shapes and colours. Asbestos minerals fall under two groups: Serpentine, which includes chrysotile (white asbestos) and Amphibole, which includes amosite (brown asbestos), tremolite, actinolite, anthophyllite, and crocidolite (blue asbestos). Chrysotile asbestos is the most commonly used at present.

Asbestos-containing materials have been used in more than 3,000 manufactured products. Among them are asbestos cement products, gasket sheet material, friction material, heat-resistant textiles, pipes, etc. At its peak in the 1970s, global asbestos production was as high as 4.8 million metric tons. In 2023, the world mine production of asbestos was estimated to be approximately 1.3 million metric tons. Millions of metric tons of asbestos are still in buildings and products across the world.

All types of asbestos tend to break into very tiny fibres, almost microscopic. Some of them may be up to 700 times smaller than human hair. From studies of people who were exposed to asbestos in factories and shipyards, it is known that breathing asbestos fibres can lead to an increased risk of lung cancer, mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the chest and the abdominal cavity; and asbestosis, in which the lungs become scarred with fibrous tissue.

Medical experts conclude that there is no safe level of exposure to asbestos fibre. Asbestos is defined as a Group I carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). There is clear and unequivocal evidence of cancer and other disease risks associated with the continued use of asbestos. Evidence continues to show that national burdens of asbestos-related diseases are directly proportional to national consumption of 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, in 2006, the International Labour Organization (ILO) urged all countries to ban the use of asbestos. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also repeatedly stated that 'the most efficient way to eliminate asbestos-related diseases is to stop using all types of asbestos'.

There is no mining or milling of asbestos in Malaysia. The main commercial activities are confined to manufacturing of asbestos products, for sale in domestic and export markets. The First Schedule of the Customs (Prohibition of Imports) Order 2012 prohibits the import of crocidolite, actinolite, anthophyllite, amosite, tremolite.

However, chrysotile asbestos are still allowed to be imported and used in the manufacturing sector under the “control use” concept. Trade data compiled by Asia Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN) reveals that in 2022, the main exporter of asbestos fibre to Malaysia was Russia whilst Indonesia was the main exporter of asbestos cement to Malaysia, amounting to 4,322 tons.

The number of mesothelioma cases in Malaysia was 27 in 2022 and is projected to increase to 51 in 2045 by the Global Cancer Observatory. The latency period for mesothelioma is generally between thirty to fifty years, from the onset of exposure to asbestos. Treatment for mesothelioma so far is of very limited effectiveness. On average, patients suffering from mesothelioma survive for about eighteen months to two years following diagnosis.

According to WHO recommendations, the most effective way to eliminate asbestos-related diseases is through a ban on the use, production and trade of all forms of the substance. The International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS) reports that 69 countries have banned asbestos as of October 2022. In some cases, countries have not officially banned asbestos but have ratified ILO conventions that aim to protect workers and prevent asbestos-related diseases.

The use of asbestos in Malaysia must be banned to eliminate the burden of disease and deaths that is caused by exposure to asbestos. Many countries have banned or are phasing out asbestos due to public health concerns and liabilities associated with asbestos. All diseases and deaths related to asbestos are entirely preventable and safer substitutes for asbestos do exist.

Among the recommendations in CAP’s memorandum is that Malaysia imposes an outright ban on all forms of asbestos, specifically chrysotile which has yet to be prohibited in Malaysia. The authorities should identify consumer products containing asbestos and stop any further imports of products containing asbestos, besides urgently phasing out and banning asbestos in local consumer products.

We need to raise awareness among workers and consumers on the dangers of asbestos and proper handling of products containing asbestos. Guidance has to be provided for asbestos removal application procedure in compliance with the Occupational Safety and Health (Use and Standards of Exposure of Chemicals Hazardous to Health) Regulations 2000.

Malaysia should have banned asbestos a long time ago. We cannot wait any longer and sacrifice more lives.

Read the memorandum here:

https://consumer.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-CAP-Memorandum_Ban-Asbestos_EN.pdf

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