Backgrounder: Asia and the Asbestos Issue

What is Asbestos?

- Asbestos is the commercial name for a group of six natural minerals: chrysotile (white asbestos), amosite (brown asbestos), crocidolite (blue asbestos), anthophyllite, tremolite, actinolite.
- Most contemporary references to ‘asbestos’ are actually references to chrysotile, or white asbestos (see Box 1).

How is Asbestos Used?

- Asbestos has been used in a variety of products for over a thousand years, and is known for its durability and resistance to high temperatures. It is incorporated into products as diverse as cotton and cement.
- The Ancient Greeks used asbestos in wicks for oil lamps. In the 1900s, it was used to produce roofing materials, insulation, cement and textiles.
- Concerns over the safe use of asbestos surfaced in the 1980s, when it was realized that the product caused diseases such as mesothelioma. In the years since, other products have been substituted for asbestos when possible.
- Proponents of chrysotile asbestos believe that it can be used safely, provided that certain safeguards are in effect. Today, asbestos is mostly used in corrugated roofing, brake pads and cement.

Who Buys and Sells Asbestos?

- Chrysotile, the most commonly used asbestos product today, has five major producers: Brazil, Canada, China, Kazakhstan and Russia.
- Asbestos is banned in some countries, including the EU member states, Australia, Japan and New Zealand. Its use in North America is tightly regulated
- The world’s top importers and exporters of chrysotile asbestos are shown in Figures 1 and 2:

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**Box 1: What is Chrysotile?**

“Chrysotile is the only serpentine asbestos that is found in almost all asbestos-based products available today and is the main form of asbestos still mined. Chrysotile is different from the amphiboles both structurally and chemically. It is generally accepted that chrysotile asbestos is less potent and does less damage to the lungs than the amphiboles.” (Source: Health Canada)
How Much is Asia’s Demand for Asbestos Growing?

- A recent study suggests Asia’s share of global asbestos consumption has increased almost five-fold over the past 90 years. From 1920-1970, Asia accounted for 13% of global demand, rising to 33% from 1971-2000, and 64% from 2001-2007.
- Since 2007, India, China, Indonesia and Thailand have been the world’s top four importers of asbestos. Vietnam and the Philippines are also major consumers.
- According to UN Comtrade, China, India, Indonesia and Thailand represented almost 80% of global asbestos imports in 2009.
- China is the world’s largest asbestos consumer. It produces asbestos domestically, but also imports large quantities from Russia and Kazakhstan to meet local demand.
- In India, asbestos imports have grown from approximately 250,000 metric tonnes in 2005 to roughly 320,000 metric tonnes in 2009. Asbestos imports peaked in 2008 at about 350,000 metric tonnes.

Why is Asia’s Asbestos-Use Growing?

- Rapid urbanization and industrialization throughout Asia has caused demand for affordable building materials, such as asbestos, to surge. In Asia, asbestos is largely used in construction materials (e.g., roofing materials, cement pipes, insulation) and in friction materials (e.g., brake pads, clutch linings).
- Asbestos use does not face trade or regulatory obstacles in many parts of Asia. Currently, only a handful of Asia Pacific economies have banned asbestos, including Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Thailand and South Korea.

Issues Surrounding the Growth of Asbestos Use in Asia

- A recent study published by the Asia Pacific Society of Respirology suggests that asbestos-related diseases and deaths in Asia are on the rise, although the study’s authors also note that there is a significant lack of information on the current situation of asbestos-related diseases in Asia. The authors hypothesize, however, that the sharp increase in asbestos-use in Asia since the 1970s will lead to an increase in asbestos-related diseases in coming years.
- Many Asian governments have little to no oversight of working conditions at asbestos using or producing facilities. Even where safeguards exist, they are often not well-enforced.
Sources Used


UN Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade). Data for import and export of Harmonized System (HS) 2524 (Asbestos).