



Women in Europe for a Common Future



Eco-Accord

PRESS RELEASE

International Expert Conference recommends better control of hazardous substances in Russia

Moscow/Munich/Utrecht, 15-10-2010 - **For the first time in Russia a public open debate was held this week to discuss the accession of the Rotterdam Convention by the Russian Federation and the issue of chrysotile asbestos, which is currently one of the most discussed issues within the Rotterdam Convention. Russia is the main producer and one of the main users of chrysotile asbestos worldwide, a hazardous substance which more than 50 countries worldwide have stopped using and which the World Health Organisation estimates to cause around 100.000 death each year.**

The High Level International Expert Conference in Moscow, Russia, was organised by civil society organisations with participants from the Russian Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Industry and Trade, Committee on Natural Resources, Natural Resource Use and the Environment of the Russian Parliament, the European Union representation in Russia, ministries (Foreign Affairs and Environment) and embassies of Germany, the Netherlands and France, the head of the United Nations Rotterdam Convention, the World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organization, coming from 9 countries.

The executive co-secretary of the Rotterdam Convention, Dr. Donald Cooper, explained the benefits of accessing to the Rotterdam Convention, allowing informed trade amongst countries. The Deputy Director General of the German Ministry for the Environment, Mr. Alexander Nies, emphasized “For countries like Russia with continuing chrysotile industry it is of utmost importance that adequate risk management measures are in place. Listing of chrysotile in the Rotterdam Convention would support the dissemination of risk-related information to importing countries and enable them to take risk-informed decisions to protect their citizens.”

The conference participants adopted a resolution, which recommends the Government of the Russian Federation to access the Rotterdam Convention as soon as possible, preferably before the next Conference of the Parties in June 2011. This should encounter no barriers since relevant legislative provisions are already in place, and will protect the Russian Federation from uncontrolled imports of hazardous chemicals.

Lack of Information in Russia

Asbestos is a very sensitive issue in Russia. Some one million metric tons are produced every year. Currently asbestos containing materials are used in Russian public buildings like hospitals, schools and kindergartens, brakes and other materials. Contrary to many other countries, which used to be large chrysotile asbestos users, there are no informative cohort studies on workers exposed to asbestos making it difficult to estimate the number of diseases and death from chrysotile asbestos in Russia.

The High Level International Expert Conference on “International High-level expert Conference on Chemical Safety and the Rotterdam Convention: Policies and Practices in Russia”, which took place on the 14th and 15th of October 20010 in Moscow, Russia, brought together for the first time 66 participants from all sectors to discuss the accession of the Russian Federation to the Rotterdam Convention and strategies for elimination of chrysotile asbestos related diseases.

Chrysotile Asbestos and cancer

Based on the IARC¹ Monographs all commercial forms of asbestos, including those sold in Russia, are carcinogenic to humans, and according to the WHO global burden of disease project, asbestos is the most important cause of occupational cancer.

Wiking Husberg of the International Labour Organization (ILO), noted that in 1986 the countries parties to the ILO agreed on the Asbestos Convention. The convention agrees on main steps from replacing asbestos by other, scientifically proven less harmful substances, and total or partial prohibition of asbestos, which is why the 95th International Labour Conference (2006), adopted a resolution on asbestos, which aims at stopping the use of all forms of asbestos.

Olga Speranskaya, Director of the Programme for Chemical Safety from the NGO Eco Accord in Russia, comments “People are not informed in Russia, they handle asbestos regularly without any protection. We need to apply both the precautionary principle and the right to know in chemicals management, in the case of chrysotile asbestos, this means that we need immediately to put in place a national programme for information to the public about the dangers of asbestos, and that people should avoid exposure to asbestos fibres”.

Chrysotile Asbestos in Western Europe

In the welcome sessions the European Union representation in Russia, explained that the European Union have implemented legislative measures to protect public health from hazardous chemicals. The representative of the French government, Mrs Anne Bourdy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shared lessons learnt from asbestos use in France, which along with 50 other nations has banned all uses of asbestos, indicating that the mortality from asbestos in France has reached more than 35.000, and could rise to an estimated total of 50 to 100.000. She also emphasized that asbestos was the leading cause of occupational cancer in France. The representative of the German government, Mr. Alexander Nies, presented the case of Germany, where the cost of each person with diseases caused by asbestos, mostly chrysotile, receive an average of 130.000 Euro until their death.

Mr. Richard Roemers from the Dutch Embassy in Moscow, added that his country was a great user of asbestos – in i.e. housing, brakes, roads, flooring – despite first warnings as early as 1932, that asbestos was linked to disease. The Netherlands banned of all types and uses of asbestos, including “white”, or chrysotile asbestos by 1998. But this is not the end of the asbestos problem, but the beginning of very costly medical care, compensations for victims and removal of asbestos from buildings. A study by his government has shown that, - had the Netherlands taken measures to ban asbestos when it was clear that there was a problem, - in 1965, then 34.000 victims and up to 20 billion Euro could have been saved.

WECF is an international network of 100 women and environment non-governmental organisations working for a healthy environment, including safe management of chemicals.

Note for the editors:

The resolution of the Moscow Conference can be found on the following websites:

www.ecoaccord.org
www.wecf.eu

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¹ International Agency on Research on Cancer IARC