

# Cancer for Sale



FERNANDA GIANNASI

By Jim Young

**T**hirty years since the lid was blown off industry's cover-up of asbestos hazards, most Americans are familiar with the slow death associated with what was once called the "magic mineral." Less well known is that Canada, our environmentally sensitive neighbor to the north, is the world's number one asbestos exporter—and is now spearheading a fierce campaign to fight international efforts to ban its product.

Since new use of asbestos has almost disappeared in the United States and other industrialized countries because of government regulation and market pressures, the main target of Canada's drive has been developing countries. Indeed, seven of Canada's top 10 markets are in the Third World. Canadian mine owners—backed by the federal government and the Asbestos Institute, a nonprofit industry group—are peddling their deadly product largely to countries like Thailand, Korea and India, where the powerful heat-resistance and binding properties of asbestos are valued in the production of low-cost building materials, as well as automobile brake linings and textiles. Critics fear the epidemic of illness and death that has plagued the West will be repeated.

Asbestos causes cancer of the lung, lung lining and abdomen and can take 20 years or more to manifest. According to a report in the *British Journal of Cancer* in January, asbestos will claim 500,000 lives in Europe by 2035. In the United States, the death toll is expected to be 200,000, report researchers at New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, which first linked asbestos to cancer in the '60s. Many public health experts say these are extremely conservative estimates. Incredibly, there are no comparable estimates for Canada, where asbestos has been mined since the 1870s, according to Jim Brophy, executive director of the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers. "The Canadian public is being kept in the dark," he says.

What's more, Brophy says, few Canadians know that this fall the World Trade Organization (WTO) will rule on a Canadian appeal to overturn a 1997 French ban on asbestos

## Canada's Asbestos Crusade

products, which Canada says violates international trade rules. Canadian officials fear the French ban will create a "domino effect," inspiring similar actions in former French colonies such as Morocco and Algeria—both clients of Canada's asbestos industry. Britain also is poised to ban asbestos, joining nine European countries that already have bans.

According to Claude Demers, a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa, the Canadian government is claiming before the WTO that France doesn't have the right to ban asbestos imports because "when used properly" asbestos is safe. If Canada wins the WTO challenge, France would have to amend its law, accept trade sanctions or pay annual fines. "We believe the bans on asbestos are based on erroneous scientific evidence and therefore are not justified," Demers says. "We have a right to regain access to those markets."

Meanwhile, Canadian officials are debating whether to file a similar claim with the WTO after the European Union announced a ban in late July. If the EU ban holds up to Canada's challenge, all 15 member countries would have to amend their laws to comply with the directive. Beginning in 2005, the EU decision would ban chrysotile or "white" asbestos—the type produced in Canada and that constitutes 95 percent of use worldwide—in cement products such as pipes and roofing, brake and clutch linings for trucks, seals and gaskets, and a number of other specialized uses. The decision was based on evidence that chrysotile is carcinogenic, causing a variety of often fatal respiratory ailments, including mesothelioma, a cancer of the lung lining.

**W**hy wage such a battle over a sagging industry that itself is dying a slow death? Although asbestos industry revenues last year were \$160 million, there are just 1,100 miners still at work—800 at the Thetford mine and another 300 in the town of Asbestos, both in Quebec. Total Canadian production—second largest in the world after Russia—has fallen sharply from 1.5 million metric tons in 1975 to just 370,000 metric tons last year.

But as asbestos demand has disappeared in the industrialized world, it has grown in developing countries. The amount of asbestos used by Asian countries almost doubled between 1970 and 1995, increasing to 1.1 million metric tons, the U.S. Geological Survey reported last year. During the same period, use in the United States and Canada dropped 96 percent, from 763,000 metric tons to 30,000 metric tons. While Natural Resources Canada reports the value of asbestos in worldwide markets fell 22 percent from 1997 to 1998, the industry is still optimistic about future sales based upon overall growth in the Third World.

As in any business, the asbestos industry sees its reputation as critical. Today, the mine owners and the Canadian government are growing concerned as more countries and international trade groups enact tougher regulations or outright bans on asbestos. "Pushing a product that industrialized countries have banned doesn't look good in those areas," Brophy says.

Canada's decision to continue peddling asbestos, of course, is not simply economic. The strategy is also political, flowing from separatist tensions constantly rippling through French-speaking Quebec, where there is great pride in the industry and where, in the mining towns, there are few employment alternatives. Government support of the asbestos industry is intended to protect mining jobs—but more importantly votes—in the politically powerful province. Canada's complex political landscape has contributed for years to the country being out of step with revelations about asbestos hazards, explains Brophy. "They missed the boat," he says. "In the late '70s, the government was nationalizing three mines while the rest of the world was learning about the dangers of asbestos."

Like unions in the United States, organized labor in Canada has battled asbestos exposure in work settings from offices to textile mills, according to Colin Lambert, health and safety director for the 450,000-member Canadian Union of Public Employees. He says CUPE is currently leading a campaign in Quebec to safeguard workers in public buildings from crumbling asbestos, after a cluster of mesothelioma cases recently emerged. But Brophy says there has been no public outcry for a ban on asbestos production from labor or Canada's environmental movement. "The mining industry in Quebec is seen within the context of the vision of an independent Quebec—and the unions for one are very supportive of that," he says. "An attack on the asbestos industry is an attack on Quebec."

When the question of a ban on chrysotile asbestos was raised at a Canadian Labour Congress convention in the mid-'80s, Brophy notes, "The whole Quebec delegation—every major union in the province—walked out. That broke the back of any kind of serious discussion within labor about an asbestos ban."

At the same time, there is a growing sense that miners themselves are at very low risk of asbestos-related disease. "They have had some real success in reducing dust exposure



**An unprotected Brazilian worker breaks open bags of asbestos.**

and miners are certainly bearing less risk than asbestos users in developing countries," Brophy says. "Unfortunately, miners may now think that everybody can use asbestos under the controlled conditions they work in. They don't blame the product."

**B**rophy says what's really at stake in this fight is the right of independent countries to regulate toxic substances within their own borders regardless of industry claims that their products can be used safely. But Denis Hamel, director of the Asbestos Institute, says chrysotile asbestos is no more hazardous than many other substances in industrial use, and that white asbestos has been unfairly targeted. "Asbestos is a general term, but we can't get confused that chrysotile and others are the same," he says, noting that the other asbestos fibers—crocidolite, amosite and anthophyllite—are more potent carcinogens. He points to evidence published in "peer-reviewed journals," without mentioning that many of these studies are industry-funded.

It is not hard to find scientific experts who strongly disagree with the benign attitude of Hamel and Demers. In an editorial published last year in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Mount Sinai's Dr. Philip Landrigan wrote: "All forms of asbestos are carcinogenic. All have been shown in clinical, epidemiological and laboratory studies to be fully capable of causing lung cancer, mesothelioma and the full range of asbestos-related diseases."

Hamel is undeterred by such assertions. Of course, part of his job is to advance the reasonable-sounding notion that chrysotile is not only safer than many substitute materials, but also less expensive. Thus, it can be more easily used by poor countries attempting to construct affordable shelters and infrastructures. Founded in 1984, the Montreal-based Asbestos Institute that he heads has a budget of approximately \$520,000, 60 percent of which is provided by the federal and Quebec governments, with the remainder coming from membership dues paid by the asbestos industry. The organization has a full-time staff of four and uses many

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consultants, including a labor liaison who is a former member of the United Steelworkers of America and the Quebec Labour Federation.

Hamel travels all over the globe to promote the "safe use" principle and combat what he calls the zealotry of "green evangelists" calling for asbestos bans. He has logged more than 100 such "missions" to date, promoting the Institute's Responsible Use Program, a voluntary agreement signed by buyers of Canadian asbestos and their governments. Buyers agreeing to the program promise to uphold the safe use of Canadian asbestos, including implementation of worker-training programs and the use of appropriate protective equipment and clothing.

They also agree to submit to random air monitoring conducted by "independent" laboratories. These labs, hired by the buyers, are charged with ensuring that airborne asbestos is less than one fiber per cubic centimeter. Who would blow the whistle if asbestos levels exceeded the voluntary policy's limit? Hamel says the consulting laboratory—the lab on the payroll of the buyer—would notify the appropriate government officials.

Critics insist that safe use of asbestos is impossible to manage. "I seriously doubt asbestos can be used safely in those countries," says Ed Olmsted, an industrial hygienist who has consulted with a number of construction industry unions in the United States. He adds that to use asbestos safely requires such costly and complex precautions that the risks and the expense are too great for most contractors in the United States, let alone the Third World.

Making matters worse, in developing countries there may be little or no enforcement at all. Cathy Walker, director of health and safety for the Canadian Auto Workers, says that conditions for the 15,000 asbestos workers in India, where she visited last year, are "appalling." Walker recounts reports of workers slicing open bags of Canadian asbestos with knives, then shaking the bags into troughs and mixing it with cement to make piping. The unprotected workers, according to the reports, were covered in asbestos dust. "Precautions are absolutely not in place," she says.

Asbestos already is causing problems worldwide. A recent study of asbestos in a South Korean textile mill found that dust levels well above U.S. standards were "commonplace."

Other studies in China point to an elevated risk of lung cancer and respiratory illness among factory workers exposed to asbestos. In Brazil, some 200,000 workers use asbestos at work, and many are exposed, says Fernanda Giannasi, an inspector with the country's labor ministry. According to a 1997 study conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Safety and World Health, there will be at least 30,000 asbestos-related cancer deaths annually for the foreseeable future.

Canada's efforts to thwart opposition to unbridled asbestos export—whether to developing or industrialized countries—are not new. In 1989, Canada challenged a comprehensive asbestos ban proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and succeeded in exempting many products from the rule, including asbestos cement pipe, disc brake pads, roof coatings and automatic transmission components. Five years earlier, when Thailand wanted to label bags of imported asbestos with a skull-and-crossbones symbol, Canada intervened and persuaded the Thais to drop the idea.

Yet neither mine owners nor Canadian government officials deny that chrysotile asbestos is dangerous. "We're saying we have the product and the safety technology and [asbestos] should only be used safely," says Jim Leveque of Natural Resources Canada. "Once we sell the stuff to a sovereign nation—if, for instance, we sell to a U.S. company and it chooses not to follow safety procedures—what the hell are we going to do about it?"

Observing proper safety precautions undoubtedly reduces health risks, but those who support widespread asbestos bans contend it is preposterous to expect such vigilance. The reality, they say, is that bans will continue to be implemented and the market will shrink. As a result, the relatively high-paying mining jobs in Quebec, as well as the jobs of many other workers who support the industry, will vanish. "In some areas of Quebec, these are the only jobs," Walker cautions. "So you simply can't throw the workers out on the scrap heap."

She suggests a "just transition" strategy for asbestos workers. This would accept that the industry is dying and that jobs eventually will be lost. But, like the GI Bill in the United States following World War II, it would provide generous assistance to those workers whose jobs are eliminated. "You have to guarantee retraining for those workers being displaced who are in a position to go elsewhere," Walker says. "For people who can't go elsewhere, they should be retiring with a decent income. Given the amount of money the federal government and industry have spent to prop up the asbestos industry, probably people could have been given full income pensions decades ago and closed the industry."

But Brophy says that within Canada the risks of asbestos don't get much public attention compared to the country's defense of the asbestos trade, so implementing such a program would be a long and difficult process. "The European ban presents us with the opportunity to take a global stand against the most documented workplace killer in existence," he says. "But right now we don't have any of that. Just this silence." ■

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ULLI MICHEL/REUTERS

Eighty percent of South African voters turned out for the June elections.

## DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

I had just arrived in South Africa, returning after 16 years, and I was motoring north along the steamy coastal road near the Indian Ocean port of Durban, the country's third-largest city. Right away, I saw mud, wood and tin shantytowns clinging to the sides of some of the green hills; these were the homes of poorer black people, the local equivalent of the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro or the *kampungs* of Jakarta.

A first-time visitor might have reacted with some shock, contrasting the shacks with the big homes in the still largely white neighborhoods like Kloof and Morningside. A newcomer could have recoiled at the tremendous inequality that persists, even as Nelson Mandela's five-year term as president ended in early June and Thabo Mbeki succeeded him after the African National Congress won another election in a landslide. This disappointed reaction would have been understandable. To a great extent, it characterized the American mainstream press reporting of the Mbeki succession. The *New York Times* contended that South Africans were "grumbling" their way toward their second free election, troubled at high rates of crime, unemployment, slow economic growth and corruption.

But I was delighted to see those shacks on hills that were uninhabited when I left in 1983. Such shantytowns around Durban, Johannesburg and other South African cities actually represent tremendous progress since the alliance between the resistance movement inside the country and the solidarity movement around the world freed Mandela and ended the formal apartheid system.

Apartheid's central axiom was that 87 percent of South Africa, including all the urban areas, the gold

# FREE AT LAST?

## A RETURN TO THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

BY JAMES NORTH