

Making the Case for White Asbestos

By [Wilson Johwa](#) | Islam Online

Demand for Zimbabwean-produced asbestos is steady, even growing, despite moves by the European Union and much of the industrialized world to ban all types of the mineral due to health concerns.

Zimbabwe is the world's fifth largest producer of chrysotile fiber, or white asbestos, after Russia , Canada , China and Brazil .

Earnings from the industry in Zimbabwe are expected to top US\$40 million this year through exports to over 50 countries around the world, the major export destinations being the Far East , Middle East and Africa .

Still, the sector's growth has been dampened by the EUs campaign for a total ban on all types of asbestos. Due to pressure from its Green movement, the Union has given its members until early 2005 to remove all asbestos from the market. Argentina , Australia , Chile , Croatia and Saudi Arabia are also among countries that have banned the substance.

The 'Ban Asbestos in America ' Bill

Asbestos fiber is used mainly in the lining of brake and clutch pedals of heavy vehicles and for high temperature seals, as well as in asbestos-cement applications such as in roofing sheets. Unmatched in terms of strength, durability and cost, the fiber is estimated to be, or to have been, a component of some 5,000 products.

Although the material is not a banned substance in the US , where asbestos products worth US\$208 million entered the country last year, there is increasing pressure to do so. In May, Senator Patty Murray of Washington introduced a 'Ban Asbestos in America ' bill arguing, "It is outrageous that at the same time Congress is trying to protect companies from future asbestos lawsuits, we continue to import and consume more and more asbestos."

Murray says asbestos is a carcinogen with no known safe level of exposure. She contends that at least 2,000 Americans per year die from mesothelioma, a deadly cancer of the lining of the lungs and internal organs caused by exposure to asbestos.

The proposed legislation aims to compel the Centers for Disease Control into creating a National Mesothelioma Registry to improve tracking of the disease, including lung cancer and asbestosis. In addition, 10 mesothelioma treatment centers would be established around the country to improve treatments for, and awareness of, the disease.

More significantly, if the bill is passed, within one year the Environment Protection Agency would propose regulations to outlaw the manufacture, processing, importation and distribution of asbestos-containing products.

A Chrysotile Asbestos Taskforce Formed

Such moves are bad news for the asbestos industry in Zimbabwe, which fears the trend might spread to its markets. Apart from the potential loss of crucial foreign exchange earnings, jobs would also be on the line. The country's two asbestos mines employ 7,000 people directly. Another 120,000 people work in downstream industries.

Given such stakes, the Zimbabwe asbestos industry has been at pains to explain that it only produces white asbestos, which it says is no health hazard if handled correctly.

This effort has been supported by the government which, four years ago, set up a National Chrysotile Asbestos Taskforce to make the case for white asbestos.

The taskforce's deputy chairman is Phil Whitehead. He says there is ample evidence to prove that white asbestos, unlike its two shorter-grained cousins – crocidolite (blue asbestos) and amosite (brown asbestos) - is not harmful to health if produced and manufactured under responsible conditions and when its use is strictly controlled.

Blue and brown asbestos were mined mainly in South Africa and Australia. But production has since ceased owing to adverse health effects.

"Certainly there is a lot of disinformation from the first world on our particular kind of asbestos," Whitehead says, adding, "And we need to balance that up with scientific information, again from the First World, that supports our industry."

Zimbabwe's Chrysotile is Pure and Rare

The industry in Zimbabwe argues that the crusade to ban asbestos has failed to make a distinction between the dangerous blue and brown types and the relatively safe and widely-used white asbestos whose health risks are miniscule and barely measurable.

Furthermore, the industry states that questions about the safety of asbestos suffer from inherent bias: that they are not based on current (and much improved) standards of asbestos manufacturing, but on those of 30 to 50 years ago, the effects of which are being felt only now.

Rabelan Baloyi, an environmental and occupational health specialist who is also a member of the asbestos industry taskforce, says there is still a risk from over-exposure to all types of asbestos.

But he says Zimbabwean chrysotile asbestos has been shown to be a pure and rare variety unlike Canada 's which, for instance, is contaminated with another type of asbestos, tremolite.

According to Baloyi, cases of mesothelioma in Zimbabwe have only been detected in people exposed to a mixture of chrysotile and crocidolite. These have mainly been in people working for the railways. Zimbabwe used to import crocidolite, which was also the material of choice for mattresses of steam engines.

"Chrysotile has been shown experimentally to cause tumors in rats," Baloyi says. "But it has not been shown to do the same in humans."

Government Slow to Ratify ILO Convention

Whitehead maintains that the Zimbabwe asbestos industry, which still has reserves that will last another two years at current consumption levels of 175,000 tons a year, has been a success story.

"Asbestos is widely-used more and more around the world," he says. "Ninety percent of the asbestos fiber that we sell to those 60 countries around the world is used without any risk in asbestos-cement applications."

Indeed, as demand for asbestos faded in the industrialized world, it has escalated in developing countries. For instance, global sales of asbestos to Asia rose from 661,000 metric tons in 1970 to 1,137,000 metric tons in 1995.

Whitehead points out that the most common products of such asbestos-cement applications are cement roof sheets and pipes. In Zimbabwe itself, about 90 percent of the water pipeline is made of asbestos-cement pipes.

"The World Health Organization (WHO) makes specific statements about the gastro-intestinal risks and those risks are zero coming from the water," Whitehead says. "There is fiber release from the roof sheets but the amount of fiber released is no different from the amount of fiber that's in the air anywhere."

Despite such safety assurances, the speed with which the Zimbabwe government has thrown its weight behind white asbestos has been unmatched by its commitment to improving safety standards. Despite signing the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 162 on the safe and controlled use of white asbestos in 1986, it only ratified it in May of this year.

Baloyi says to comply with the convention, the government still lags behind in adopting legislation that will compel the industry to adequately protect workers from exposure as well as guarantee compensation for those already affected, the number of which is a closely-guarded industry secret.