

Preface

by Professor Masazumi Harada



Asia has experienced many industrial catastrophes: calamitous outbreaks of cadmium and arsenic poisoning, toxic levels of air pollution, killer epidemics of Minamata disease and the explosion of 40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate gas which caused thousands of deaths in Bhopal. Until recently, the most lethal of all occupational killers had done its work unseen and unnamed; for decades it infiltrated workplaces, homes, schools, and communities. Successive governments and corporations remained disinterested in the potency of this killer, preferring to focus on booming economies and healthy balance sheets. As the death toll mounted, individual men and women began to look for explanations; they came together with others who were similarly affected to unmask the silent assassin who was stealing their futures: Asbestos!

Long after warnings had been heeded by most industrialized countries, Japan was still using crocidolite and amosite asbestos; when the new century dawned, Japan was one of the world's biggest consumers of chrysotile asbestos. As the incidence of asbestos disease and mortality increased, official denials of the asbestos hazard wore ever thinner, as thin as the pleura of the lungs which had so easily been penetrated by deadly asbestos fibers. The feelings of disbelief over negligent behaviour by revered Japanese companies such as Kubota, Nichias and Asahi Sekimen mutated into anger; formerly loyal employees publicly criticized those who had been responsible for the hazardous conditions in the shipyards, asbestos-cement factories and car plants.

With no company or government compensation and little or no information available on medical treatment, asbestos victims and their families were marginalized by these debilitating and totally preventable ill-

nesses. Ailing workers, grieving relatives, public health campaigners and trade unionists came together to raise awareness of the hidden tragedies which were occurring behind so many closed doors in Osaka, Yokosuka, Yokohama and Amagasaki City. As victims' groups sprang up, campaigners discovered that the plague taking so many innocent lives in Japan was also ravaging other industrial populations. To add insult to injury, asbestos salesmen, led by Canadian stakeholders, were aggressively cultivating markets in newly industrializing countries in Asia.

Japan's asbestos epidemic has only just begun; thousands more will die in the decades to come. Billions of yen will be needed to take care of the injured and decontaminate our infrastructure. And yet, the asbestos industry continually reassures its customers that asbestos can be used safely under "controlled conditions." This did not happen in Japan and it will not happen elsewhere. Countries which continue blindly down the asbestos road will pay the price for asbestos use not in rupees or bahts but in lives lost and families decimated. The only safe use of asbestos is no use.

