Postscript

For decades, asbestos stakeholders profited from the global trade in a killer substance; they lied to employees, corrupted civil servants, bribed politicians and perverted the scientific process. When industrialized countries banned asbestos, the hazardous technology was exported to emerging economies; twenty years after asbestos manufacturing was transferred from Japan to Korea, it was sent from Korea to Indonesia; these dangerous processes are now on their way to mainland China. Left in the wake of this toxic chain of production were dead and injured workers, at-risk communities and polluted neighborhoods. As elsewhere, Asian victims found that when it came to the crunch, asbestos polluters never paid the price for their negligence and greed; the final bill for national consumption was measured in broken families and lives lost, items which never appeared on corporate balance sheets. The extension of the man-made global asbestos plague to Asia was initially ignored and then denied by national authorities. When finally forced to engage with this issue, governments demanded the production of national mortality data to "prove" that asbestos use was hazardous; as if, human biology differed in China and France and Thai lungs were better able to expel asbestos fibers than Australian ones.

Since the AAC 2009, there have been several developments which suggest that the reality of the asbestos challenge faced by Asian populations is becoming ever more apparent. The asbestos debate, which has spread to new locations, is being impacted by the voice of the victims and contributions from sectors of civil society new to this issue. In Taipei, the largest city in Taiwan, a meeting took place in May 2009; following the ***International Conference on Industrial Risks, Labor and Public Health: An Interdisciplinary Analysis by Social Sciences and Epidemiology***, a declaration was issued which called on countries to "ban the production, manufacture, use and trade of products containing all types of asbestos, including chrysotile immediately." Weeks later, researchers from Korea and Japan returned to Cibinong, Indonesia to undertake additional monitoring – with Indonesian colleagues – of the fallout from asbestos-consuming factories belonging to PT Trigraha and PT Jeil Farjar. While, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), an asbestos focus group was convened by a non-profit health and safety organization to produce construction industry guidelines for dealing with asbestos-containing materials. Considering the UAE's recent building boom and the fact that average annual asbestos consumption between 2005-2007 was 18,673 tons, this initiative is certainly much needed [109]. On August 20, 2009, a medical symposium on asbestos took place at the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences in Tehran; subjects on the agenda included screening for asbestos-related diseases, radiological and pathological findings for asbestosis and mesothelioma, and treatment therapies [110]. In India, plans to reopen asbestos mines in Jaipur attracted criticism from the Mines Labor Protection Campaign, an NGO from Rajasthan, and environmentalists who reiterated the risk of asbestos exposures to workers in the mines and mills [111]. Whereas, once upon a time, trade liberalization of the Indian asbestos industry might have been implemented without opposition, nowadays informed citizens are monitoring all attempts to enhance commercial opportunities for this sector.

Municipal, national and judicial bodies in Asia have also been taking action on the asbestos menace. In the Philippines, a civic resolution ordered that asbestos pollution caused by the operations of the Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corporation in the Sitio Sapid region be cleaned-up under a controlled toxic waste plan. Lepanto officials and the company, which was ordered to remove six truckloads of asbestos-contaminated construction debris it had secretly dumped at Barangay Sapid in 2007, are facing administrative and criminal charges for the improper handling of the toxic waste [112]. At the beginning of July, the Ban Asbestos Act of 2009 was tabled by Representative Raymond C. Mendoza in the Congress of the Philippines. The bill calls for a ban on the import, manufacture, processing, use and distribution of asbestos as well as other measures to safeguard occupational and public health [113]. One month later, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines called on the Government to assess the risk posed by unsafe working practices at the Manila Thermal Power Plant where hundreds of tons of asbestos-contaminated waste are currently being removed [114]. Korean authorities, who have been under constant pressure after news of asbestos pollution at industrial sites and in consumer products was released in April 2009, have banned asbestos from all products for children and products that come into contact with the skin. As of September 2009, manufactured goods must be less than 0.1% asbestos; manufacturers of paint and wallpaper which use talc will be compelled to obtain a public certificate proving that the talc used contains less than 1% asbestos [115]. On July 21, at a cabinet meeting in Seoul, legislative revisions to improve occupational protection from asbestos during construction and demolition work were under consideration [116]. It seems that a colleague from Seoul hit the nail on the head when he said that anyone who does not know about asbestos has not been in Korea recently.

Verdicts issued in July 2009 by Japanese courts do not bode well for asbestos defendants. On July 6, Judge Haruhiko Sakae of the Yokohama District Court ordered

the Government to pay 76.84 million yen (~US$810,000) for the mesothelioma death at age 51 of Hitoshi Taima, a worker at the U.S. Navy's Yokosuka base. Taima, who was employed from 1977 to 1995 by the Japanese Government, was exposed to asbestos whilst working as a mechanic [117]. Two days later, the Chubu Electric Power Company was ordered to pay 30 million yen (US $317,000) for the mesothelioma death of 67-year-old Kenji Fujiwara, a former electrician who had worked for the company from 1958 to 1999. As the ruling highlighted the defendant's obligation to protect workers who do not directly handle asbestos, it is significant for others with similar exposures [118]. These cases not only illustrate the substantial level of damages now being awarded for Japanese asbestos deaths but also the potential for increasing the number of claimants. It seems that in Japan at least some negligent corporations are being held to account for the damage they have done.

While the life and death struggle by civil society to end the asbestos plague is a priority on every continent it is even more so in Asia, the region which accounts for the majority of worldwide consumption. From China's Sandung Peninsula to the Cambodian capital, people have the right to know that their lives are being endangered by avoidable exposures to asbestos; they have the right to demand that action is taken to protect themselves and their children. After years of preliminary work, progress is now being made; the faces of the victims and their spirit remain the bedrock of the ban asbestos campaign. The existence of the new regional campaigning group A-BAN will serve as a much needed counterweight to industry lobbying; asbestos propaganda will now be challenged at local as well as national levels. The transfer of hazardous technology will be tracked and at-risk groups will be told the truth about the toxic substance poised to invade their communities. In the months to come, important asbestos meetings will take place in Cambodia, India, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Korea. In 2009-2010, new outreach programs and campaigns will raise awareness, identify victims, lobby for improved services and press for the introduction of national bans throughout Asia. There is no way to put the asbestos genie back in the bottle. An asbestos-free future is possible!