Rotterdam Convention:
good news for fish, workers can wait till 2011

The Rotterdam Convention came into law on 24 February, 2004. The agreement, adopted in 1998, introduces a legally-binding Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Procedure by which exporters must notify and get permission from an importing country before shipping certain chemicals that are on a special list. At present, the procedure applies to a list of 39 hazardous chemicals. Asbestos is listed, but only certain forms of it (actinolite, anthophyllite, amosite, crocidolite and tremolite), whereas chrysotile, which accounts for more than 90% of world asbestos production, is not included.

The 120 signatory States to the Rotterdam Convention met in Rome from 27 to 31 October 2008 to discuss including chrysotile asbestos and two pesticides in the international list of hazardous substances. Only tributylitin (TBT), a pesticide compound that is used in paint for ship hulls and is toxic to fish, molluscs and marine mammals, was accepted. Human health was not given the same priority. The governmental representatives failed to agree on listing either endosulfan, a pesticide widely used throughout the world, especially by cotton growers, or chrysotile asbestos. It has to be said that most of the health damage done by both chemicals is suffered by peasant farmers and labourers in the South.

Once again, Canada played a key role in putting the block on the Convention. It was represented there by effectively two delegations: the official governmental delegation and that of the misinformation agency it finances, the Chrysotile Institute, working behind the scenes. Canada talked several Canadian asbestos-importing States into opposing chrysotile asbestos' inclusion in the list. India, Vietnam, Pakistan and the Philippines went along with the tactic. The position of Canada and its clients shows how little the asbestos lobby itself believes in the possibility of its controlled use in workplaces. The fact is that prior information by exporting countries is essential to any policy for controlling the conditions of asbestos use. Withholding information is the logical extension of withholding knowledge by exporting countries determined not to see the consequences of their marketing policy. It is significant that Canada has never once refused to sell asbestos, including for production activities carried on with no health protection.

The failure of the Rome meeting puts the very continued existence of the Rotterdam Convention at risk. The requirement of unanimous support by States parties is not realistic. It allows the chemical industry lobbies to find allies to veto substances for listing. Switzerland put up proposals to resolve the situation. Inclusion of the two rejected substances should be on the agenda of the next Rotterdam Convention meeting in 2011.

Madhumita Dutta, the Indian delegate from the Alliance for the Rotterdam Convention gave the following comment on the situation: "As NGOs working with workers and their families exposed to Chrysotile asbestos in our countries, we are shocked and distressed at the outcome of the decision or rather indecision on inclusion of chrysotile asbestos in the annex III. It seems obvious that the parties to this convention, including those who have opposed to the listing of chrysotile asbestos in the annex III, have not disagreed to the science or the scientific process that conclusively proves this substance's ability to harm, especially people in the poorer countries. Therefore obviously the opposition to its listing has been based purely on domestic commercial and political interests, undermining the larger public health and human rights interest that this convention promotes by giving rights to countries to make informed decision. This is indeed a very sad state of affairs. While the parties here today decide to bring back the decision on inclusion of chrysotile asbestos in two or three years, there will be so many more lives lost, uninformed and unprotected due to this deadly substance, thanks to the entrenched position of a few." ■