



# ASBESTOS MINING COMES TO A STANDSTILL

In late November, Cavanagh Matmor, 11, came with her mom to Ottawa to deliver a heartfelt message to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Ms. Matmor had lost two loved ones to a kind of cancer linked to asbestos. Her grandfather died after years of working in an asbestos plant. Then, her grandmother died from the asbestos dust her husband had brought home on his clothing.

What did Ms. Matmor have to say to Mr. Harper? Please stop Canada from mining, producing and selling asbestos to other countries.

## WHAT IS ASBESTOS?

Asbestos is the group name of six naturally occurring minerals. Canada has huge asbestos deposits in a 100-kilometre-long stretch of land in southeastern Quebec, where people have been mining it since the 1870s.

What is its appeal? This substance has long fibres that are strong and flexible. Miraculously, asbestos can also stop fire in its tracks – and that once earned it the nickname “the magic mineral.” For decades it was used in everything from building materials to crayons. It insulated the walls of most Canadian schools and homes.

## A KILLER MINERAL

But concerns about its dangers began to surface after miners repeatedly complained of coughing up blood, shortness of breath and exhaustion. By the 1970s, scientists had learned that inhaled asbestos dust could cause several deadly lung diseases, including cancer.

Today, the **World Health Organization** (WHO) reports that more than 100,000 people die of asbestos exposure every year. Over 40 countries ban its use.

## AN UNPOPULAR POSITION

The Canadian government also knows asbestos is a **carcinogen** and has spent millions to have the substance removed from buildings everywhere, including those on Parliament Hill. The Canadian Cancer Society and 25 other organizations have urged the federal government to halt exports of asbestos. Yet we still send about 100,000 tonnes of the product annually to more than 60 countries. In 2010, we sold nearly 70,000 tonnes for about \$39 million to India alone.

Some people feel Canada is not behaving responsibly. The issue came up in June at a meeting about the Rotterdam Convention treaty. This agreement obliges **signatory** nations such as ours to include warnings when selling and shipping hazardous products abroad. Canada angered many in the international community when it successfully blocked a move to have asbestos added to the list of hazardous products.

## 'SAFE' ASBESTOS?

How do we justify our stand? WHO says every form of asbestos is dangerous, but some experts disagree. They argue that the kind we export, called chrysotile, is less deadly than other varieties. Chrysotile fibres supposedly don't disintegrate into dust as easily as other types. So when workers use it, in theory their risk of

illness should be reduced. The federal government also insists that it won't ship chrysotile to any country that does not use it safely.

But even if that's true, Canada can't monitor how chrysotile is handled. For example, safe usage requires special equipment and well-enforced regulations. Yet people in India have reportedly been working with it dressed only in shorts.

“Anyone who says there's controlled use [of asbestos overseas] is either a liar or a fool,” said one consultant.

## AN INDUSTRY IN TURMOIL

At any rate, **demand** for the controversial product is down and by the end of November, Ms. Matmor seemed to be getting her wish. Production had stopped at the Lac d'amiante du Canada Mine due to technical difficulties. Work has also been halted at Jeffrey Mine for lack of money. These two facilities in Quebec were the last asbestos mines in Canada.

However, Jeffrey Mine might re-open in the spring. It all depends on whether executives can secure a **loan guarantee** from the Quebec government, as they have in the past. If they succeed, Ms. Matmor will be badly disappointed.

“They don't know how it feels to have a grandmother and grandfather die of asbestos,” she said. “It breaks my heart . . . that people from other countries are going to have to go through the same thing.” ★

## DEFINITIONS

**CARCINOGEN:** a cancer-causing substance

**DEMAND:** the amount that consumers are willing to pay for a good or service, based on how much they want or need it

**LOAN GUARANTEE:** a promise by a third party to repay a debt if the original borrower can't repay it

**SIGNATORY:** a person or country that has signed a treaty or other legal document

**WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION:** an agency established in 1948 responsible for coordinating international health activities

