

Asbestos exposure: The slow killer

Environment Daily Times 2-8-04

PESHAWAR: Akbar Ali, a young government official, cries in sorrow as he narrates the suffering of his father, Malik Qadir Khan, who died in 2001 of mesothelioma. The disease is an incurable lung cancer caused by exposure to asbestos, a fibrous variety of a natural mineral.

"Residing in Mardan and working at the Pakistan Tobacco Company in Akora Khattak, my father suddenly started complaining of chest congestion at the age of 55," says Akbar. "Very soon, the problem became worse and my father had an X-ray done." The report revealed that Qadir Khan's lungs were filled with water.

"The first thought that entered my mind was that my father was suffering from Tuberculosis," said Akbar. "The medical reports proved otherwise: my

father had been hit by mesothelioma, a disease much more serious and deadly than TB." An outwardly healthy looking Qadir Khan was soon bed-ridden, dying at the age of 57, within two years of contracting the disease.

"Mesothelioma is a lung fibrosis which is contracted due to exposure to asbestos in 99 percent of cases," The president of the Pakistan Chest Society, Dr Arshad Javed said. "We have diagnosed more than 500 cases of this fatal disease at the Lady Reading Hospital (LRH) in the last few years, which is a matter of concern for the people as well as for the government." He said that most of the patients belonged to the northern districts of the NWFP, including Charsadda, Mardan, Malakand and Mohmand Agency.

"Mesothelioma is an incurable dis-

ease worldwide and so the patients can only be treated for temporary relief," said Dr Mubashir, registrar of the Chest Ward at the LRH. "Mesothelioma patients live for 18 months to two years after contracting the disease." Presently, a number of suspected patients of the disease are admitted at LRH.

Noor Jehan, an environmental researcher at the Peshawar University doing her doctorate on asbestos hazards said that asbestos was found in many parts of northern and northwestern Pakistan and that most people exposed to the substance were mine workers. A physical and chemical analysis of asbestos found in NWFP and FATA proved that the mineral was highly carcinogenic and potentially hazardous, leading to mesothelioma and other lung

diseases. The mining, milling and crushing procedures adopted for exploring and refining asbestos are highly hazardous and unsafe, she said. Apart from mine workers and labourers, the dust produced from crushing the plants also affects the local population.

"The government should declare asbestos as carcinogenic and allow its mining only under strict supervision," she said. "The Pakistan Environmental Act should also be amended to emphasise on pollution control and hazard mitigation related to minerals and the mineral based industry."

Dr Khangul Jadoon, the chairman of the department of mining engineering at the NWFP University of Engineering and Technology said that ship builders, construction workers, plumbers, gas fitters, carpenters, metal

plate workers, vehicle body makers, vehicle break leather makers and others are also exposed to asbestos. Dr Jadoon said that the mining department had submitted a proposal to the Higher Education Commission for launching a project to investigate the causes of the spread of 'pneumoconiosis' among the workers at underground mines in the NWFP. The HEC should suggest preventive measures to reduce the incidence of occupational diseases among mine workers, he said. "Laws related to safe mining cannot be implemented because most of the asbestos deposits are in the remote and tribal areas," said an official of the mining department. "We have banned the exploration of asbestos, but the activity is still being pursued because of non-compliance with the law." APP