



NDP MP Pat Martin spoke to members of the media on Parliament Hill about the effects of asbestos. (Chris Roussakis/ QMI Agency)

OTTAWA - Canada is blocking asbestos from being listed as a hazardous chemical under an international convention, drawing fire from critics here and abroad.

"The government says that the product is safe if used in a certain fashion but they're refusing to ensure that the buyer is told to beware," said NDP Leader Jack Layton on Thursday.

"This is absolutely outrageous and unacceptable."

The international community is currently in Geneva, Switzerland, debating whether to list chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous chemical under the Rotterdam Convention, a UN treaty that covers banned or restricted pesticides and industrial chemicals.

There needs to be consensus to add a new substance to the list and Canada opposed the agreement, helping kill the tightened regulations.

The listing would allow recipient countries to make informed decisions about handling the carcinogen.

The federal government has openly supported the asbestos industry in Quebec, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper campaigning twice during the federal election in the riding where Asbestos, Que. - and one of Canada's last chrysotile mines is located.

Chrysotile lobbyists have also been meeting regularly with Natural Resource Canada officials since 2010.

Industry Minister Christian Paradis argued Thursday that Canadian companies have every right to export a product in demand abroad and that asbestos mining creates jobs in the province.

The Quebec government also supports the industry and has shuffled millions of dollars into the financially troubled Jeffrey Mine.

Opposition NDP, Liberal and Green MPs have been hammering the Conservative government to reverse its stance and allow the chemical, which is used in construction and can cause cancer if inhaled, to be listed under the Rotterdam Convention.

"Without exaggeration, we are exporting human misery on a monumental scale and yet we are taking active steps to ensure that companies do not even warn their customers," NDP MP Pat Martin said during question period.

International public health experts and labour organization are also pressuring Canada to fall in line with the international community.

India, which imports Canadian asbestos, supports the listing of the dangerous mineral.

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