

## Japan-Sendai: Rubble cleanup bares asbestos

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SENDAI - Inside the chunks of slate and wallboard smashed and scattered by the March 11 tsunami hides a health risk that has been overshadowed by contamination from a leaking nuclear plant: the odorless and nearly invisible threat of asbestos.

Activists have found the cancer-causing, fibrous material in the air and debris collected from the devastated northeastern coast.

Levels in the air remain within Japan's safety range but are expected to rise significantly once cranes and cleanup crews begin their work in earnest, scraping and shaking loose the minuscule, white fibers from insulation and fireproofing layers.

Local officials are overwhelmed by the aftermath of the March 11 mega-quake and tsunami, including the swamped Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant as engineers struggle to restore its cooling systems.

The officials in hard-hit areas such as Miyagi Prefecture Å\ where Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko visited tsunami evacuees Wednesday Å\ acknowledge they have yet to focus on asbestos and the potential contamination of other such airborne particles.

Meanwhile, workers, volunteers and residents roam freely through the debris. Some wear masks; others don't, despite the plumes of dust that shoot up every time a giant steel claw grabs a load of debris. On windy days, particles swirl in the air. They sting eyes and irritate throats before leaving behind a thin layer of dust on whatever passes through.

"There are a lot of people going back into the rubble to search for valuables and photos," said Takuo Saitou, a Sendai-based attorney and a spokesman for a group addressing defective home issues in northern Japan.

"There are people not even wearing masks. This is like a suicidal act," he said. "We want people to know this is a problem."

Asbestos fibers are so small they easily enter the lungs, where they cause inflammation. Studies show they increase the risk of lung cancer, the rare cancer mesothelioma and lung disorders, including asbestosis. Because the effects of asbestos are long-term, it often takes decades to see them.

Saitou's group submitted letters last week to the environment minister and other government officials asking for air monitoring around disaster-hit areas, effective public information, mask distributions and proper handling of asbestos-laden waste.

The problem has been faced before by both Japan and the U.S. Å\ two of the biggest asbestos consumers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As they struggled to address disasters, they found themselves spread too thin to address longer-term health hazards.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was criticized for its monitoring of asbestos in the wake

of Hurricane Katrina. Rescue crews working in the rubble of the World Trade Center after the Sept. 11 attacks also were at risk because the material was used in one of the fallen towers.

Japan faced similar issues after the 7.2-magnitude Hanshin quake in 1995. As the government cleaned up 170,000 damaged structures, it enacted no measures to limit the spread of dust or enforce the use of protective masks and did not immediately monitor asbestos, said Masahide Sakamoto, a Senshu University researcher who studied the government's cleanup after the Kobe quake.

Asbestos was once seen as a miracle material used to strengthen cement, insulate buildings and fireproof ceiling and floor tiles. Consumption fell sharply after the mid-1970s as the link with lung cancer grew clearer. But in Japan, which relied on asbestos as it rebuilt from the ashes of war, public awareness of the risks lagged. Although spray-on asbestos was banned in 1975, a broader law preventing asbestos use didn't come until 2006.

Asbestos was not a major worry immediately after the March 11 tsunami, when the debris was wet and settled. But that rubble is now being hauled away, shaking loose the carcinogenic fibers in old wallboards and floor tiles.

The Environment Ministry has issued recommendations on the disposal of asbestos-containing building materials, but it's unclear if they're being enforced. It also conducted air monitoring in 15 locations in Fukushima, Ibaraki and Miyagi prefectures earlier this month, said Hisao Yamaguchi, an Environment Ministry official. The results will not be out until at least next month.

"We have experience from the past, so we do believe that this time, similar issues with asbestos will emerge," he said. "Public awareness of asbestos is also much higher now." At the Environment Ministry, we want to act as quickly as possible," Yamaguchi said.

The health ministry said Wednesday it has issued pamphlets outlining safety guidelines and distributed 90,000 masks in the hardest-hit prefectures. The asbestos risks in the tsunami wreckage are why Tokyo-based EFA Laboratories Co. decided to offer free asbestos testing and analysis to emergency workers and residents.

"If we can help them identify asbestos fibers and protect them to the greatest extent possible, I'm a happy guy," said Kevin Carroll, EFA's president.

During a tour of Sendai last week, EFA asbestos analyst Eric Eguina took debris samples from a half dozen locations to test at a mobile laboratory.

"I hope to find nothing, but I know it's there," said Eguina.

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\* <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20110429a3.html>

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## **Govt to monitor asbestos in earthquake-hit areas**

A panel will be set up to devise measures to prevent workers clearing debris in areas devastated by

the March 11 disaster from contracting asbestos-related diseases, such as mesothelioma and lung cancer, it has been learned.

Asbestos was once widely used as a construction material, particularly for heat insulation. Mixed with dust, the substance is easily scattered through the air.

In 2006, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry totally banned the production, import, sale and use of products with a content rate of asbestos exceeding 0.1 percent.

The panel will consist mainly of scholars and leaders of nonprofit organizations knowledgeable about asbestos, the ministry said Tuesday.

Workers and volunteers removing debris in the earthquake- and tsunami-hit areas will receive advice from ministry officials, while asbestos control instructors will be assigned to local labor standards inspection offices, a ministry official said.

Volunteers are expected to sharply increase during the holiday-studded Golden Week period from Friday to May 8.

"We hope they will work with the danger of asbestos in mind," the official said.

Environment Ministry officials have already started preparations to measure asbestos dispersal from the debris in the affected areas.

Officials from the two ministries will jointly conduct on-the-spot investigations, and the panel will consider countermeasures based on the results of the probes and other factors.

According to the health ministry, structures built before the 2006 asbestos ban may have used the material for heating insulation. It will be difficult to identify it amid the debris, the officials said.

Many people removing debris are probably temporarily hired residents from the quake-hit areas and volunteers, both not used to such work, thereby increasing the risk of contracting asbestos-related diseases, the official said.

Although the ministry has distributed 90,000 dust prevention masks, many workers prefer not to wear them as they restrict breathing and the recent rise in temperatures increases the discomfort. The health ministry has dispatched nearly 30 staffers from the central headquarters and local labor bureaus to encourage the workers to wear the masks.

The ministry will shortly distribute 600 high-efficiency filter masks with electric fans, which make breathing easier.

It also instructed local labor bureaus to hold meetings for people removing debris for the first time. The bureaus will instruct the workers and volunteers to wear dust prevention masks and steel-capped shoes, and move to the windward side of smoldering debris. Pamphlets on safety awareness will be placed in volunteer centers.

"Safety and health education must be improved at actual working sites," a senior health ministry official said.

The ministry therefore will ask people with experience in asbestos control, such as those in the construction industry, to be assigned as instructors in labor standards inspection offices in the affected areas, the official added.

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Only 1 Hanshin quake case

After the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, a man removing debris developed mesothelioma after inhaling asbestos, and was recognized for worker's compensation.

This was the only case at the time, as it was difficult to specifically identify how a person contracts the disease because many people worked at construction sites where asbestos dust was prevalent before the quake.

The general public was not well informed of the danger of asbestos at the time, so many workers did not wear masks.

As asbestos-related diseases may have latency periods of 20 to 30 years, some experts say health problems from the substance may increase in the future.

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\* <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T110427006115.htm>

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