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Quick Note – Venezuela Earthquake – Asbestos[1, 2]

Purpose

This note provides a quick summary on asbestos for relief and recovery operations after the Venezuela earthquake. The note does not constitute a definitive guide to managing risks associated with asbestos in Venezuela. Additional information on the scope of asbestos and overall debris management requirements is expected shortly.

Overview of Risk

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral commonly used in construction and found in industrial sites (e.g., for fire or heat protection), in vehicle brakes and in other machines. In a natural, in the ground, state, asbestos poses no risk to health. When disturbed, particularly in mining, manufacturing or deconstruction, particles can be released into the air and, once inhaled, lead to chronic and at times fatal health impacts. These impacts can manifest over short periods of time but are more likely medium to long term consequences.

Demolishing buildings or clearing debris following an earthquake can increase the likelihood of airborne asbestos, at the site where work is taking place and downwind from work sites. As a result, both on-site workers and those who are downwind are at risk.

While the level of asbestos in Venezuela earthquake debris is not known from direct assessments, it is presumed that asbestos will be present and poses a risk in debris removal and building deconstruction.

In addition, earthquake debris likely contains other hazardous materials. Measures used to reduce asbestos risks will, in general, reduce these other risks. However, wetting debris should include steps manage run-off or water soaking into the ground, which will be contaminated. Where debris removal or deconstruction involves industrial sites, standard wetting approaches may lead to contact with water-reactive chemicals and trigger chemical reactions (e.g., fire, explosions). The FEAT tool can be useful in assessing possible water-chemical interactions.

Control Measures

Controlling exposure to asbestos is relatively simple. As a basic approach, exposure control involves:

- Limiting dust during on-site work, e.g., extensive wetting of debris.
- Worker protection, including respirators, protective clothing and safe working procedures.
- Public education, to increase risk awareness and reduce unnecessary concern and the spread of misinformation.

Selected Information on Asbestos Risk Management[3]

- **Global Shelter Cluster Asbestos Webpages:** general guidance on safe management of asbestos after disaster and examples of asbestos management efforts.
- **Manual para la elaboración de un plan de trabajo con materiales que contienen amianto friable y no friable** (Gov of Chile).

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[1] Drafted by C. Kelly, SLSC Cluster, environmentoperations@sheltercluster.org
[2] This document has not been peer reviewed to speed distribution. It is subject to revision.
[3] This listing does not represent a professional recommendation on the information provided and any actions should be verified with asbestos risk management experts.

- **Guía de buenas prácticas para el manejo y prevención de riesgos asociados a la exposición de los materiales y residuos con contenido de asbesto** (City of Bogota).
- **la Fundación Colombia Libre de Asbesto**: guidance on asbestos risks and handling.

Additional Considerations

- UNDP can be expected to initiate large scale debris management and has, in the past, incorporated practices which address asbestos risks, including formal training. The training materials may be of use in community-based debris management projects.
- The Pan American Health Organization may support, directly or via a Health working group, sharing information on risks associated with asbestos and other debris-related hazards.
- The OCHA UNEP Joint EER Team is looking to integrate one or more Environmental Assessment Experts into the UNDAC response to the earthquake. Asbestos is included in the expected scope of work.
- Chile, after the earthquake in 2010, faced a significant challenge with deconstructing multi-story buildings and may be a source of information on building deconstruction and asbestos and other hazard management.
- Separate information on the reuse, repurposing and recycling and safe disposal of debris is being developed.

Additional Support

Additional support on asbestos and other environmentally sound approaches to debris management is available from the Global Shelter, Land and Site Coordination Cluster by emailing environmentoperations@sheltercluster.org.

El Clúster Global de Coordinación de Alojamiento, Tierras y Emplazamientos ofrece apoyo adicional sobre el asbesto y otros enfoques ambientalmente adecuados para la gestión de escombros; para ello, puede escribir a environmentoperations@sheltercluster.org.
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