

## ***Nongovernmental Group in India Seeks Supreme Court Help To Ban Asbestos***

NEW DELHI, India — The Supreme Court of India on July 14 announced that it is reviewing a public interest litigation (PIL) case seeking to ban the manufacture and use of asbestos-containing products in India, sources told **Mealey Publications**.

The Supreme Court has issued notices to the government of India and state governments in the country about the initiative to ban asbestos in the country based on a PIL filed on July 9 by Kalyaneswari, a nongovernmental organization, the sources said. According to the sources, the PIL alleges that more than 1 million Indian workers have been hazardously exposed to asbestos and calls for the Supreme Court to direct the Labour commissioners of all territories to identify victims of asbestos exposure who are suffering from an asbestos-related disease so that they can be compensated.

### ***Custom Duties***

The PIL filing comes less than a month after the finance minister of India, P. Chidambaram, announced that the country would reduce by 15 percent the custom duties for asbestos, potentially expanding the very industry the PIL is seeking to ban. The decision to reduce the duties for asbestos follows a similar pattern in recent years as the import tariffs for asbestos were reduced by 78 percent in 1995-1996 and by 25 percent in 1999-2000.

"The budget has ignored both global and national movements demanding a ban on the continuing use of killer asbestos in India," said Gopal Krishna, spokesperson for Ban Asbestos India (BANI). "India faces a massive and completely preventable epidemic of early painful death and suffering caused by asbestos. Our goal will be to encourage the Finance Minister to reconsider the Government's position on asbestos."

BANI and other groups in recent years have failed to force the government to ban asbestos importation or the use of products within the country. India imports 100,000 tons of chrysotile asbestos, mostly from Canada, while 2,500 metric tons of chrysotile and 35,000 metric tons of tremolite asbestos are annually mined within the country. The demand for asbestos in India is estimated to be 100,000 metric tons, a fifth of which is mined domestically. ■