



The Hidden Danger in Disaster Zones: Why Asbestos Must Be Part of Our Humanitarian Risk Lens

Lessons Sharing from Indonesia for Myanmar and the Region

When disasters strike, the first to arrive are often humanitarian responders and volunteers — ready to clear rubble, set up shelters, and deliver aid. But in their rush to help, they may be stepping into a **silent and invisible danger**: asbestos.

In countries like Indonesia, where white asbestos is still widely used in roofing, walls, and ceilings, earthquake debris is not just broken concrete — it's **potentially toxic waste**. And yet, time and again, local volunteers, aid workers, and even affected communities are exposed without protection, protocols, or even awareness of the risk.

What Makes Asbestos So Dangerous — and So Overlooked?

Asbestos, when intact, may pose little harm. But when structures collapse — as they do during earthquakes — asbestos fibers become **airborne**, invisible, and deadly when inhaled. Long-term exposure is linked to **lung cancer, mesothelioma**, and chronic respiratory diseases. The effects are irreversible, and the victims are often those who stepped up to help.

Yet in emergency response, **occupational safety is often focused on physical trauma, not toxic exposure**. This has to change.

Indonesia's Wake-Up Call: Asbestos in Disaster Recovery



Figure 1. Debris caused by the Lombok Earthquake (2018) showed many broken asbestos roofing (Source: Shelter Cluster Indonesia)

Indonesia's experience, particularly after the 2018 Lombok earthquake, exposed a glaring gap:

- An estimated 25% of houses in affected areas had asbestos-cement roofs.
- Debris was cleared by local volunteers and family members without masks or protective gear.
- Few organizations had protocols to identify or safely manage asbestos-containing materials (ACMs).

Following similar risks in Central Sulawesi, the provincial government issued a decree restricting asbestos use in shelter construction — an important step, but still rare in the broader disaster management system.

Realistic, Context-Specific Solutions Are Possible

Imported protocols from high-income countries often prescribe full hazmat suits, industrial-grade air filters, and certified removal teams. But in Indonesia and many similar settings, this is simply not feasible during a disaster response.

What we've learned instead is the importance of simple, practical, and context-appropriate measures:

- Map and flag asbestos-risk areas during rapid assessments
- Provide PPE (especially masks and gloves) to debris removal teams and volunteers
- Brief responders and communities on how to identify and handle suspected ACMs
- Avoid disturbing asbestos debris unnecessarily — wet it, cover it, and mark it
- Train field staff on safe cleanup procedures even before a disaster strikes

These steps don't require massive funding — they require awareness, preparation, and a shift in mindset.

A Call to Action for Myanmar and the Humanitarian Community

We have an ethical obligation to protect the people who put themselves on the front lines of disaster response — not just from falling debris or aftershocks, but from invisible threats like asbestos. To humanitarian actors, local governments, and donors working in high-risk countries like Myanmar, Indonesia, and beyond — this is a call to action:

- Include asbestos risk assessment and mitigation in rapid response plans
- Equip frontline responders with minimum protective gear
- Raise awareness among communities and volunteers
- Advocate for restriction of asbestos materials in the reconstruction efforts
- Invest in localized guidance — not necessarily perfect, but practical and applicable

Because no one should get sick for doing the right thing.

We welcome your thoughts.

This article is part of a series reflecting on Indonesia's experience in disaster response, aimed at contributing to shared learning and regional dialogue — particularly in the context of the Myanmar

earthquake response. We warmly invite others to share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

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