**Green Warriors: Asbestos, Our Sick Schools**

**54’**

Key

Captions/graphics/on-screen text

**Narration**

Non-English dialogue

English dialogue

00:00:06 Mathilde

Let’s put on some gloves.

00:00:15 Mathilde

**Who would have thought that we’d end up in face masks and gloves in amongst pencil cases and backpacks while investigating the presence of asbestos in schools in France?**

00:00:26 Mathilde

It’s breaking down. There’s quite a lot here in the partition wall. I’m going to take a sample here.

00:00:35 Mathilde

**Who would have thought that we’d find so much asbestos this close to children?**

00:00:45 OST

DANGER: ASBESTOS  
LEVEL TWO DUST ACCUMULATION

00:00:46 Mathilde

**Asbestos, a carcinogenic material, can still be found in many buildings in France, 26 years after it was banned. And those buildings include schools… But no one knows the true extent of the danger, even though hundreds of teachers have already been affected.**

00:00:49 OST

French Republic  
Liberty Equality Fraternity

00:00:53 OST  
NURSERY SCHOOL

00:00:56 OST

Public Nursery School

00:01:02 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

I have to take my pills. Even teachers can lose their lives while trying to make a living. I never thought there would be asbestos in schools.

00:01:17 Mathilde

**Over the course of a year, we are going to take dozens of samples in schools to measure asbestos contamination, with the help of scientists.**

00:01:29 Scientist

Here we definitely have hundreds and hundreds of chrysotile fibrils that form a cluster. This sample is full of asbestos.

00:01:38 Martin

**How many schools in France contain asbestos? With the help of a whistleblower, we’re going to try to find out by contacting all 50,000 schools in the country and the 35,000 town councils that are responsible for their administration.**

00:01:48 OST  
Asbestos\_present\_2023  
Yes

00:01:53 Jean-Marie Schleret

We need to map out which schools contain asbestos. We must find out exactly where they are, identify which schools they are, and decide how urgent intervention is.

00:02:06 Martin

**We’re going to trace the contamination to the biggest asbestos mine in the world in Kazakhstan. Having supplied France for years, the mine is still running at full speed. People there are also trying to protect themselves against the toxic fibres, which can even be found in sandpits.**

00:02:31 Martin

It says suspected asbestos.

00:02:34 Martin

**We’ll present the results of our investigation in Kazakhstan and France to the public and will make the news.**

00:02:41 LCI

There is still asbestos in our children’s schools.

00:02:41 OST  
ARE SCHOOLS FULL OF ASBESTOS?

00:02:44 France 2

Asbestos fibres are still present more than 20 years after being banned.

00:02:49 France 3

Nearly one in three schools in France contains asbestos. That’s what an inquiry carried out by our colleagues from the programme Green Warriors has found.

00:02:57 Martin

**Will our findings help to protect children and teaching staff from this toxic legacy?**

00:03:07 OST

A PREMIERES LIGNES PRODUCTION

00:03:12 OST

WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF FRANCE TELEVISIONS AND USHUAÏA TV

00:03:17 OST

A FILM BY MATHILDE CUSIN AND MARTIN BOUDOT

00:03:23 OST

GREEN WARRIORS: ASBESTOS, OUR SICK SCHOOLS

00:03:35 Martin

**Our investigation begins in the peaceful steppes of Kazakhstan. In the midst of this vast, flat land, a hill. Or rather a slag heap and a gaping hole. It belongs to the largest asbestos mine in the country. We are in Zhitikara, western Kazakhstan, a few kilometres from the Russian border. This region has one of the largest global reserves of chrysotile, or asbestos ore – 37 million tonnes. Asbestos fibres are known carcinogens but around a dozen countries still use it, including Russia, India, China and Kazakhstan. Dust clouds from the mine tirelessly fall over the town here.**

00:03:55 MAP

UKRAINE RUSSIA KAZAKHSTAN CHINA MONGOLIA

00:03:59 MAP

ZHITIKARA

00:04:05 MAP

ZHITIKARA

CHRYSOTILE

00:04:30 Viktor Bezvougliak

The asbestos factory is barely 5 kilometres from town, so we breathe all of that in.

00:04:40 Martin  
**Viktor Bezvougliak has always lived here, and he even worked in the town’s asbestos factory at one point. But one day, he discovered how dangerous the fibres really are.**

00:04:54 Viktor Bezvougliak

I found the information myself. No one had told us that it was dangerous.

00:05:05 Viktor Bezvougliak

Here, they say asbestos is safe and our own scientists even confirm this. They say it’s only banned in Europe because you’ve found an alternative to asbestos, that it’s purely a commercial decision.

00:05:29 Viktor Bezvougliak

They don’t care about the health of their people.

00:05:34 Martin

**Viktor Bezvougliak is the only person living in Zhitikara who dares to speak out on the subject. Kazakhstan is still an authoritarian country and asbestos is a national gem. In spite of the risks, he wants to break the silence. It’s the first time a foreign television crew has been to his town.**

00:05:54 Viktor Bezvougliak

When we get up in the morning, our cars are covered in asbestos dust as if it were frost.

00:06:05 Video extract

Look at my car. That’s not snow, it doesn’t melt. It’s asbestos. This is what our children are breathing in.

00:06:19 Viktor Bezvougliak

This invisible enemy is all around us, we can’t escape it or protect ourselves from it. We breathe it in, we live with it. There are some reassuring reports on the presence of asbestos, but the State creates those, they’re not independent reports.

00:06:33 Martin

**This citizen needs scientific proof of asbestos contamination. We’ve brought with us this yellow suitcase, which is a revolutionary asbestos detector developed in Europe following 10 years of research. Loretta King is part of the team that designed it. We are among the first in the world to use it.**

00:06:54 Martin

Can you tell us more about the dangers of asbestos?

00:06:59 Loretta King

Asbestos fibres get stuck very deep into our lungs, with their sharp shape, they’re pointy like needles. And unfortunately that leads to several illnesses and cancers that can take decades to show themselves.

00:07:15 Loretta King

Our machine works thanks to laser light scattering technology, coupled with powerful properties that attract asbestos fibres. Turn it on, the machine will calibrate. You’ll hear the air pump activate and information will show on the screen. If your device detects asbestos in the air, an alarm will sound.

00:07:30 OST

Last alarm

Alarms:

Fibres present:

Fibres:

Particles:

00:07:39 Martin

And what should we do in that case?

00:07:42 Loretta King

Get out of the room, as quickly as possible.

00:07:46 Martin

**We start by taking samples on Viktor Bezvougliak’s balcony.**

00:07:56 Martin

I’m going back in. There’s asbestos on the balcony. I’m going to close the door like that.

00:08:02 Viktor Bezvougliak

It’s probably because of the dust from the factory, brought here on the wind.

00:08:08 Martin

**There’s even asbestos in the apartments here. And when we’re in the stairwell going down to the ground floor…**

00:08:22 Martin

That’s a red alert. So, there’s asbestos in your stairwell. We’re not going to stay here.

00:08:33 Martin

**As well as airborne contamination, Viktor Bezvougliak suspects that residue from the asbestos mine is also used in the town’s infrastructure. Like at this school’s football ground.**

00:08:49 Martin

So, you think this sand has come straight from the quarry?

00:08:53 Viktor Bezvougliak

Yes, yes, from the asbestos mine.

00:08:57 Martin

Let’s let it run a bit. Why would they put this kind of thing next to a football ground?

00:09:04 Viktor Bezvougliak

It’s cheaper to use this kind of sand.

00:09:10 Martin

It’s Sunday today so there’s no one here. I imagine there’s usually kids at this school?

00:09:14 Viktor Bezvougliak

Yeah, the school’s open, children study here.

00:09:21 Martin

Viktor, it says suspected asbestos. I’ve put a mask on, you should put one on too, and pinch the nose.

00:09:32 Viktor Bezvougliak

We have a right to be safe and not fear for our health. A safe environment should be a priority. There are kids that come here.

00:09:44 Martin

**We took other samples at different places in the town. The contamination appears to be widespread. Does the company that owns the asbestos mine and factory know about this? Kostanay Mineral, the asbestos giant, refused to meet with us or to answer our questions. But they have really made their mark on the town. The group has funded the main square, the stadium, the tennis courts, the hockey courts, the community centre and even some monuments. The mayor of Zhitikara is particularly proud of this.**

00:10:02 OST (in Cyrillic script)

KOSTANAY MINERAL

00:10:26 Nourzhan Outeguenov

This represents the power and scale of the work and our community’s gratitude to the workers.

00:10:34 Martin

**Nourzhan Outeguenov agreed to meet with us, but he was under observation. We didn’t realise it at this point but the man on the left to whom he’s speaking is the managing director of Kostanay Mineral. Such proximity to the manufacturer seems to have influenced the mayor a bit. Our interview was filmed.**

00:10:56 Martin

Do you think that asbestos is dangerous?

00:10:58 Nourzhan Outeguenov

No, I don’t think it’s dangerous. As for knowing if the town is polluted, I can assure you that’s not the case. Today, the production of asbestos has no serious or catastrophic impact on the environment.

00:11:16 Martin

Can you tell us about the rates of cancer in this town?

00:11:25 Nourzhan Outeguenov

I know there is this idea that asbestos is a cause of certain illnesses, but I want to reiterate that during the last twelve years, no illness linked to asbestos has been indicated in our region or in our town.

00:11:49 Martin

**Zero deaths due to asbestos in the largest asbestos production zone in the world. Surprising. Especially as we know that one single asbestos fibre can be enough to cause cancer. As night falls, one of the town’s citizens will enlighten us on the reasons behind this mystery. He would prefer to remain anonymous.**

00:12:16 Anonymous

My father worked in the asbestos factory for decades then he fell ill and died of cancer. During all those years, he was diagnosed with bronchitis, then it was too late, and they couldn’t operate. It was actually lung cancer. The most important thing here above all else is to not diagnose cancers linked to asbestos. It doesn’t matter what the diagnosis is, as long as it’s not linked to asbestos.

00:12:47 Anonymous

If you look at official statistics, people die here from all sorts except illnesses caused by the operation of asbestos mines. It’s like the victims are invisible.

00:13:01 Martin

**The next day, as we get back on the road, we notice this car.**

00:13:07 Martin

It’s a black BMW that’s following us, that’s parked down there. It’s following us.

00:13:19 Martin

**Then this other vehicle.**

00:13:22 Martin

We’re being followed again. Look at that one, parked just to the side. There you go, it starts driving as soon as we pass. So now we’ve got one in front and one behind.

00:13:39 Martin

**For three days…**

00:13:41 Martin

It’s the grey Skoda that’s just behind us.

00:13:43 Martin

**…around ten cars take turns to follow us everywhere. Including outside our rented apartment.**

00:13:51 Martin

Take a right, take a right, quick. They’re at the end of the road, let’s see if we can lose them.

00:13:58 Martin

**We manage to get rid of our chaperones to go visit the local hospital.**

00:14:07 MAP

(text in Cyrillic script)

00:14:07 Martin

Palliative care, there.

00:14:09 Martin

**We don’t have much time. We can’t get our camera out, so we film on our mobile phone. One of the doctors confirms that their service is overwhelmed with asbestos-related illnesses that go undiagnosed.**

00:14:26 Doctor

Here we have people in palliative care, with stage four cancer. These are patients that we can no longer treat. If you look at our statistics, we write everything down in our log, there are more cases of lung cancer coming from areas like Zhitikara.

00:14:53 Doctor

It’s simple: where there are asbestos mines, there are cases of lung and bronchial cancers.

00:15:04 Martin

**We didn’t get to find out anymore. The police found us and we were taken to the police station. After being interrogated for several hours by the Kazakhstan intelligence services, we were finally released. There was no way we could continue our work. We had to leave the country. Asbestos from Zhitikara continues to be exported across the world, having previously been widely used in France.**

00:15:34 Mathilde

**For decades, asbestos was used in our country until it was definitively banned in 1997. Asbestos removal then became obligatory for extremely damaged buildings. Over time, the material breaks down and is likely to emit its known carcinogenic fibres into the air. In Marseille, this is particularly the case for several schools.**

00:16:00 Nathalie Laclau

Look, there’s one. You can see they’re all pretty much in the same state. They all look the same.

00:16:14 Mathilde

**Nathalie Laclau was a teacher and headteacher for almost 30 years. Now retired, she has taken up the fight against asbestos-ridden schools.**

00:16:26 Nathalie Laclau

We’re in the 14th arrondissement. That’s what we traditionally call the northern districts of Marseille, which are the working-class districts, as you can see by looking around. These areas are large, densely populated, and poor.

00:16:40 Mathilde

And are there lots of schools with asbestos in these areas?

00:16:43 Nathalie Laclau

Well yes, that’s right, there’s quite a few and there’s a lot because they’re part of the areas. We built these districts, these big areas and then we built the schools to go with them. You can see these nicely coloured panels. Look at the state of the school, the panels are in the same state. One of them is even falling off.

00:17:03 Mathilde

Do these schools have asbestos from floor to ceiling?

00:17:06 Nathalie Laclau

It’s everywhere. They put it in the floors, in the paintwork, in the cement, in the walls, the bulkheads, the firewalls, the roof insulation, the pipes. So it’s everywhere. They put it everywhere. But then this building design is really tough. They overdid it so the buildings would last.

00:17:27 Mathilde

**Nathalie Laclau has also tracked down asbestos-ridden schools in the more affluent districts of Marseille. Basically, no one would be spared.**

00:17:37 Mathilde

Here we have exactly the same structure.

00:17:40 Mathilde

Do we know if the parents are aware?

00:17:42 Nathalie Laclau

Of course the parents don’t know because there has been such a code of silence on the asbestos problem. We were really told it was wonderful without being told its drawbacks. It’s appalling. It’s appalling to see that there are children there and that we’re not putting them in good conditions.

00:18:01 Mathilde

**Four years ago, Nathalie Laclau created an organisation to warn the Ministry of National Education and town councils, who are responsible for school administration. There is no official list of these buildings. She has had to visit all the schools in the city to create a map.**

00:18:18 Mathilde

21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29. I’ve counted at least 29 asbestos-ridden schools.

00:18:25 Nathalie Laclau

But there are others on the other side of the map.

00:18:28 Mathilde

**All the buildings built before asbestos was banned in 1997 could be affected.**

00:18:34 Nathalie Laclau

There are 475 schools in Marseille. There are a few that were built after ’97 but not many at all. I’m not even sure there are 10 of them. In any case, before ’97, we were still insulating cafeterias, especially the ceilings, all those things, with asbestos, that’s that.

00:18:51 Mathilde

So, you believe around 470 schools in Marseille could contain asbestos.

00:18:56 Nathalie Laclau

Not far off, yes.

00:18:58 Mathilde

If we decide to carry out testing in those schools particularly, would the results be of interest to you?

00:19:04 Nathalie Laclau

Yes, definitely, of course. And not just us, not just us. It would interest us but it would interest the students, their parents, and teachers even more. It would at least enable us to make people aware. After almost 25 years now, why haven’t we started to address this problem? What are we waiting for now in 2022? Since 1997? It’s unbelievable.

00:19:33 Mathilde

**Does asbestos in these schools really represent a danger to the health of children and staff? We need a strict protocol to be able to quantify the number of fibres in these establishments. We’re led by Maxime Misseri, geologist and researcher at the University of Compiègne. He has spent decades working on different asbestos detection techniques.**

00:20:03 Maxime Misseri

It could be useful in your case to take samples using wipes that contain a surface-active agent. That way you’ll be able to collect almost all of the fibres present on a surface.

00:20:16 Mathilde

**We don’t have permission to go into schools to take our samples. However, certain employees, once informed about the presence of asbestos and worried for their health and that of the children, agreed to let us in. We filmed discretely, as a security measure, and went in at times when the children weren’t at school.**

00:20:45 Mathilde

So here we’re in the children’s dormitory, there’s quite a lot of holes that have been made in the wall.

00:20:48 Mathilde

**We noticed a lot of damage to walls that were reported to potentially have asbestos.**

00:20:51 Mathilde

Here’s a hole. And right at child height.

00:21:01 Mathilde

**We started talking surface samples.**

00:21:12 Maxime Misseri

Ideally, you’ll create a template with a 10cm by 10cm window in it. Take your wipe and go all over it, a number of times. Put your wipe in a waterproof bag. Clearly mark the bag with the sample number. The best is to take samples in corners as the deposits will be greater in areas where there’s less air flow. On top of cabinets, places where dust will settle.

00:21:52 Mathilde

**We gathered samples from several schools in town. But Marseille is far from the only area affected by this phenomenon. On the other side of France, in la Manche, we’ve been contacted this time by a father. Vincent Sevestre. He assures us that his two children go to school in an asbestos-ridden school. He sees the buildings every day from his window.**

00:22:26 Vincent Sevestre

Two prefabricated buildings that were completely made of asbestos, they’ve been on that site since the ‘70s, have schooled children since that time and are in a deplorable state.

00:22:40 Mathilde

Okay, that’s a lot of asbestos.

00:22:43 Vincent Sevestre

A lot of problems.

00:22:45 Mathilde

**Vincent Sevestre and other parents and teachers assure us that they’d been asking to see the ATD, the school’s Asbestos Technical Document, for years. This document, which is usually available to parents and staff, is an inventory of the presence of asbestos in an establishment and should be regularly updated. After years of fighting, they were finally able to see it in 2021, when they uncovered a dramatic situation.**

00:23:14 Vincent Sevestre

Poles in the courtyard. Here you’ve got sheets of asbestos in the external cladding of the school that are punctured. That’s inside a classroom in prefab. And of course, in this document you find a whole load of materials that the diagnostician considered to be damaged. My feeling on this is that during the school council meetings, this was reported and noted, reported by the teachers to their leadership team. That the leadership team reported it to the Ministry of National Education and that the Ministry of National Education reported it to the town, but nothing has happened.

00:24:00 Mathilde

**Is this school polluted with volatile asbestos fibres? Just like in Marseille, we want to take samples from the classrooms. And just like in Marseille, we’re doing it when the children aren’t at school.**

00:24:20 Mathilde

Come here and see, I’ll show you. This is really in a bad way. Look, that’s the ATD, the school’s Asbestos Technical Diagnostic. Look: in the prefab classroom, interior wall panel. So that, that’s asbestos material, as indicated in the ATD. Look.

00:24:49 Gregoire

That much is clear!

00:24:51 Mathilde

Usually on the ATD, the diagnostician would advise some corrective actions to simply protect, encapsulate this wall. But it’s still out in the open, with students that come into this classroom every day. So, I’m going to take a sample here.

00:25:20 Mathilde

It’s also damaged here. In fact, it’s everywhere.

00:25:28 Mathilde

**The asbestos walls in this classroom have a lot of damage. Holes from which volatile asbestos fibres could emerge. We take a sample from a student’s desk to see if possible pollution could be deposited even closer to students. Then we take more samples in the pre-school covered courtyard, where the roof also contains asbestos.**

00:25:59 Mathilde

**For more than a year, we collect samples from schools in different regions of France. Then we take them to a laboratory that specialises in asbestos analysis. Maxime Misseri, the scientist who has led us since the beginning of our investigations, works in this lab. Every day, analysts here study dozens of samples from all over France, whether extracted from buildings or old asbestos quarries.**

00:26:36 Mathilde

So here, I’ve brought you the surficial samples that we’ve taken in around 15 schools across France.

00:26:43 Mathilde

**The usual method in France for measuring the number of asbestos fibres in a room is to take air samples. But according to Maxime Misseri, our surface sampling method could allow us to detect pollution problems well in advance.**

00:26:58 Maxime Misseri

This method is useful to know if there are potential sources and if there are materials that emit asbestos fibres that we’ll then find in the air one day.

00:27:07 Mathilde

So it could be a starting point to identify potential problems and risk.

00:27:12 Maxime Misseri

Exactly. It’s first and foremost a tool for managing risk used in the United States. In France, we don’t use it a lot but it is used from time to time, particularly in cases where there’s a legal process.

00:27:29 Mathilde

**First, our samples are cleaned, by passing through this machine.**

00:27:34 Scientist 2

It’s a suction system with a particle filter. It’s even more important in the lab that if we find asbestos in a sample, we have to be sure that it came from that sample and not from the sample next to it or the atmosphere in the lab.

00:27:50 Mathilde

**Then the samples are examined using this transmission electron microscope.**

00:27:57 Yann Lapeyre

We’re going to go to a working magnification, which is between 10,000 and 20,000. And we have a certain amount of fibres, so it’s fairly rich in fibres, this sample. Here we definitely have hundreds and hundreds of chrysotile fibrils that form a cluster. This sample is full of asbestos.

00:28:17 Mathilde

**High rates of asbestos fibres. Will this be the case for the rest of our samples? We’ll find out in a few months.**

00:28:30 Martin

**At the same time, a meeting is going to change the trajectory of our investigation. In Nancy, a man is going to disclose some crucial information. Jean-Marie Schleret. For 26 years, he was the president of the National Observatory for the Security of Schools, an independent organisation that is under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education. In 1995, when asbestos was on the verge of being banned, he was already recommending an exhaustive inventory of schools affected.**

00:29:00 OST

“We must map out schools that contain asbestos.”

00:29:05 Jean-Marie Schleret

We need to map out which schools contain asbestos. We must find out exactly where they are, identify which schools they are, and decide how urgent intervention is.

00:29:17 Martin

**It would take him 20 years to get started on such a map. In 2015, the Ministry of Education authorised him to send a questionnaire to all headteachers of primary schools, middle schools and high schools. He only received responses from a third of them but even this amount led to explosive conclusions. At least 85% of institutions were likely to contain asbestos.**

00:29:43 Jean-Marie Schleret

Asbestos present in the cement in paving slabs on the ground. That’s very common. Asbestos in the foundations of poles. The risk of asbestos is real and it’s great but everyone’s hiding a little bit behind what is still, despite everything, a taboo. As soon as you start talking about asbestos, because people fear the worst, they’d rather not talk about it. But this is a serious mistake. I don’t think it’s controversial. In any case, we must promote transparency and say what’s going right and what’s going wrong.

00:30:15 Mathilde

Did you get the impression at the time that the conclusions of this report disturbed the government?

00:30:19 Jean-Marie Schleret

Yes, yes, they were disturbed because, how should I say this, some figures can be alarming.

00:30:27 Mathilde

And what were the consequences?

00:30:29 Jean-Marie Schleret

The National Observatory for the Security and Accessibility of Schools was abolished by a decision from the National Assembly in December 2020 but on a proposal from the Ministry of National Education regarding the Observatory.

00:30:49 Martin

**Shoot the messenger. But the message still remains the same. Asbestos in schools is a danger and it seems teachers are paying the price. Over the last few years, thousands of teachers and staff of the Ministry of National Education have developed a mesothelioma, one of the asbestos cancers. But many cases have gone undetected.**

00:30:55 OST  
DANGER: ASBESTOS

DECONTAMINATION ZONE

00:31:14 Mathilde

**In Marseille, Nathalie Laclau, a former headteacher, has organised a prevention meeting this morning for teachers from the city.**

00:31:24 Nathalie Laclau

We’ve already had in this short year two cases of people, teachers, colleagues, who had been in touch with us that have died. These are people that I’d seen, I’d spoken to. And then they’d gotten a mesothelioma and died so it does happen.

00:31:46 Mathilde

**At the meeting are loved ones of the victims of asbestos, specialists and sick teachers. Like Marie-Josée de la Cruz, a primary school headteacher who has cancer.**

00:31:59 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

Everyone knows we’ve all been exposed to asbestos. Everyone knows that we’ve had work done, that we’ve drilled into what we want all the time. I even had a security committee tell me when I was headmistress, “Above all, don’t make holes.” I said it was about time they told me. I’d already been at the school for ten years and had made plenty of holes.

00:32:23 Mathilde

**Marie-Josée de la Cruz agreed for us to visit her at home, despite the fatigue her illness causes. Today, she suffers from metastasised ovarian cancer and has had back to back chemotherapy for the past four years.**

00:32:41 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

I’ve had a lot, a lot, a lot of things in a short amount of time, so I have to fight so that… my body needs to hold on.

00:32:53 Mathilde

**After demanding an asbestos technical diagnostic for years, this headteacher finally got one and found that her school was full of it.**

00:33:03 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

I blame my employer for one, because the law says that the employer is supposed to protect their employees. The city of Marseille for 40 years, 50 years, in any case, schools have been completely abandoned. So I ask myself, how much longer are we going to leave the children like that? That’s why I think it’s criminal, it’s like they’re totally inconsequential. Their children are in these schools.

00:33:33 Mathilde

**Her cancer has just been recognised as a professional illness linked to her exposure to asbestos. Marie-Josée de la Cruz has been on sick leave for three years. She doesn’t know if she’ll ever get back to her students.**

00:33:46 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

It’s a very advanced cancer because I didn’t… I left it until I was at the very end of my tether. I didn’t listen. I’d already been very tired for eight or nine months, but I didn’t listen. I didn’t listen so much that I thought on the Monday I’d go back to work. I left my office ready to go back to work on Monday, but I’ve never been back.

00:34:22 Mathilde

**Two months later…**

00:34:26 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

I have to take my pills.

00:34:30 Mathilde

**…we are back with the headteacher. It’s 6am and she’s getting ready for her next chemotherapy session.**

00:34:41 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

I put this patch on so that when they inject me, it doesn’t hurt. It’s easy and I can’t really feel anything. You have to put it on at least 1 hour before. I’ve got a bit of a way to travel so if I put it on there, it’s too late.

00:35:02 Mathilde

**The strength of Marie-Josée de la Cruz’s treatment is causing her body to tire. And its side effects are beginning to show.**

00:35:18 Marie-Josée de la Cruz

These are my gloves, my mittens, and my slippers. I’ve got a drug that ruins your nails, that makes them fall off. The cold stops the drug from going to your extremities and that avoids having cuts, pains, all that. I’m really scared because the more I relapse, the more I think to myself this is difficult. I couldn’t say I’m not scared of dying. I am scared but I tell myself it’s not time for that and that this is going to work.

00:36:10 Mathilde

**Her story is far from unique. In the Ile-de-France region, another teacher, another fighter, who is also sick. Claude Aufort is a retired teacher. She is also going for another chemotherapy session today.**

00:36:35 Claude Aufort

I read what they said about my last scans, that basically it’s stable. However, I’ve got quite a few tumours that have appeared.

00:36:45 Doctor

But at least with the chemo, it’s not growing.

00:36:48 Claude Aufort

Exactly, that’s it. It seems like it’s steady.

00:36:52 Mathilde

**Claude Aufort was a primary school teacher for 40 years in a Paris suburb. After retiring, she learned that her school had been completely demolished due to the presence of asbestos in the walls.**

00:37:05 Doctor

Take a deep breath in through your mouth. Do you always whistle a little like that?

00:37:13 Claude Aufort

Um, no, that’s new.

00:37:15 Mathilde

**Claude has mesothelioma, a cancer of the pleura, which is specifically caused by asbestos inhalation. After her diagnosis, she was given just 15 months to live. But the ex-teacher has thwarted her prognosis; she’s been fighting her cancer for more than 18 years.**

00:37:33 Claude Aufort

I knew it wasn’t curable. A few of my friends who knew about medicine knew that a mesothelioma was usually very quickly fatal. But in the end, no, I’m still standing. I have every intention of hanging on in here, but I am a little worn out. I used to say this was my way of fighting. I felt that I would win, not the mesothelioma. So that motivated me. I think that’s how I’ve kept going for so long. Perhaps it’s my way as a trade unionist, as a leader, I always want to be the one to win. And that’s been good for me, I think. But perhaps there’ll be a moment when I’ll say, okay, that’s enough now, let it go. Every story ends up like that anyway.

00:38:22 Mathilde

**The final chapter in Claude Aufort’s story was written on a Thursday, a few weeks after our meeting. On 2nd February 2023, the teacher died as a result of her cancer.**

00:38:38 Martin

**How many teachers like Claude Aufort, headteachers, maintenance staff, school assistants, are there? How many students have been contaminated by asbestos? There is no official figure. To find out, we need to know the exact number of asbestos-ridden schools. Along with our team of investigators, we decided to continue and complete the survey started in 2016 by Jean-Marie Schleret, the whistle-blower.**

00:39:11 Jean-Marie Schleret

The methodology that we didn’t perfectly achieve in 2016, is to not only have responses from the schools affected but also from the Ministry of National Education.

00:39:28 Mathilde

We would need to contact all the schools in France on the one hand and then all the town councils in France.

00:39:32 Jean-Marie Schleret

Exactly, and you’re totally right as the Ministry of National Education is definitely responsible for the health of their staff and students. But they’re not responsible for the buildings.

00:39:45 Martin

**On Jean-Marie Schleret’s advice, we sent a questionnaire to almost 35,000 town councils, from the smallest village to the city of Paris. We also contact France’s 50,000 primary schools. We ask them if their institution contains asbestos and if they have an ATD, an Asbestos Technical Diagnostic.**

00:40:07 Jean-Marie Schleret  
Not just the ATD but an updated ATD, when the first one was carried out and if they have regular follow-up.

00:40:18 Martin

**Over a period of almost eight months, we will receive and sift through responses from thousands of people.**

00:40:24 Manon

Since this morning, we’ve received 359 responses.

00:40:28 OST  
We do not wish to pursue…

00:40:31 OST  
Madam Mayor refuses…

00:40:35 OST  
We have received a hierarchical order to not respond to you…

00:40:29 Martin

**But we also have to endure several refusals from schools and town councils alike. We receive testimonies from teachers and headteachers who wish to break the silence around this issue.**

00:40:45 Anonymous headteacher 1

I got a call from my superior who said that there’s asbestos in all the schools in the town so we can’t just shut all the schools. And that we should stop this circus.

00:40:57 Anonymous headteacher 2

I don’t want to send you a written response because it’s a sensitive and delicate subject and I’m already risking annoying my higher ups.

00:41:06 Martin

**While we continue to work on the survey, we receive the results of our surface samples taken with surfactant wipes.**

00:41:16 Martin

**In Marseille, our analyses show the presence of asbestos in 4 institutions out of 5. A sample taken in the classroom contains 16,314 fibres per metre squared, three times more than the alert threshold in place in the United States. No such threshold exists in France. In the Manche region, all samples taken came back positive, including those from the desk of the schoolchildren. Near the damaged wall, we found 1,666,589 per centimetre squared, 333 times higher than the alert threshold. And under the asbestos roof of the covered courtyard, it’s even worse: the levels found there are 970 time higher than the alert threshold. In total, 79% of the samples we took in schools in France came back positive for asbestos fibres. Out of the 19,331 schools in France that we’ve managed to obtain information on, 5507 contain asbestos, or around 30% of institutions. Frightening results.**

00:41:18 OST  
Asbestos

16,314 fibres/cm squared  
x3

00:41:42 OST  
Asbestos  
1,666,589 fibres/cm squared

x333

00:41:53 OST  
Asbestos  
x970

00:41:59 OST

Positive tests

79%

00:42:12 OST

19,331 schools  
Positive tests 30%

00:42:28 Mathilde

**In Paris, we’ve organised a public meeting to announce the results, in the presence of Maxme Misseri, the asbestos specialist, several teachers, Nathalie Laclau, the ex-headteacher who has travelled from Marseille, and Vincent Sevestre, the parent of students at a school in la Manche. Louis Boyard, a deputy for La France Insoumise is also present, as is Marie Toussaint, an environmental member of the European Parliament.**

00:43:00 Mathilde

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for answering our call to attend the presentation of our investigation results.

00:43:08 Mathilde

**Several media outlets cover the event.**

00:43:12 Mathilde

According to our investigation, out of 19,331 schools, 5507 contain asbestos. According to our estimates, this affects almost 700,000 schoolchildren.

00:43:17 OST

5507 schools contain asbestos.

4768 schools didn’t contain any.

4381 schools or town councils didn’t respond.

3752 schools hadn’t established a…

…before 1997. These institutions ignore…

00:43:26 Mathilde

**We also reveal the results of our surface samples to the public.**

00:43:29 OST

331 schools in our study…  
contain asbestos.  
…built before 1997…

00:43:31 Maxime Misseri

The method we used with Green Warriors is a quantitative method and it shows that the closer we get to a damaged material, the more fibres there are. I also spoke to a pneumology professor yesterday who, like myself by the way, thought the levels found would be extremely low. When I told him the rates were several million fibres per centimetre squared, he said that it was without a doubt a real concern. It’s very worrying.

00:44:05 Mathilde

**In the school that Vincent Sevestre’s children attend, the samples under the covered courtyard revealed the presence of more than 16 million fibres per centimetre squared.**

00:44:15 Vincent Sevestre

It’s 10.40am as I speak to you. Right now, my son is playing under that covered courtyard, which is open to the wind. And in that open courtyard, the rate is 970 times higher than the American threshold, which could be applied here in France. So, it’s absurd. These rates are absolutely indisputable.

00:44:37 Louis Boyard

The figures are striking. You have to take them to heart. There will be almost 700,000 children exposed to asbestos, plus staff and other school visitors. And we need a quick and urgent response from the State on this.

00:44:45 OST

ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN DANGER?

00:44:53 Mathilde

**Journalists grab hold of these figures.**

00:44:57 Maxime Misseri

It’s surprising to have these very elevated levels in certain cases. These results are alarming.

00:45:05 Mathilde

**A few weeks before, we had shared our results with the entire France 3 network. Each regional branch seized them to create new reports.**

00:45:07 OST

List of French towns/cities – as these would stay the same, I haven’t transcribed them here

00:45:17 France 3 Picardie

It’s 7pm, welcome to the Picard news headlines. Asbestos is still present in our schools. Shocking discoveries by our colleagues at Green Warriors on France 5.

00:45:23 OST

Inquiry  
Asbestos in our schools

00:45:27 France 3 Lorraine

What about in our region, in Lorraine? Are our schools affected? Are our children in danger?

00:45:27 OST  
Asbestos  
One out of three schools affected

00:45:32 France 3 Grand Est

4586 schools in Grand Est and 641 contain asbestos

00:45:32 OST

Grand Est responses  
4586 schools

641 Asbestos present

Asbestos  
Some schools still contaminated

00:45:38 France 3 Normandie

According to this study, that would be 339 Normandy schools.

00:45:38 OST

Asbestos

“Green Warriors” see red in La Haye-du-Puits

00:45:42 France 3 Corse

At least 21 island schools affected and impacted by asbestos.

00:45:42 OST

HEALTH  
At least 21 schools affected by asbestos

00:45:46 France 3 Bretagne

In Brittany, 37% of schools that responded contain asbestos.

00:45:46 OST  
Exclusive inquiry  
Asbestos still in our schools

00:45:50 OST

In Brittany  
37% of schools that responded contain asbestos

00:45:50: France 3 PACA

In total, in PACA, 361 schools contain asbestos, that’s 25% of institutions in the region.

00:45:50 OST

Inquiry  
Asbestos in schools

00:45:53 OST  
Green Warrior investigation into the presence of asbestos in schools  
In PACA  
361 schools with asbestos

Or 25%

00:45:58 Mathilde

**The national media take up our findings and want to talk to the main participants in our investigation.**

00:45:58 OST

Danger Asbestos  
Traces of asbestos found in more than 5,000 schools  
Le Point

00:46:01 OST

Asbestos – is your school affected?

00:46:03 Vincent Sevestre

The risk has been trivialised. Very clearly, we’ve been told that the material wasn’t damaged and so wasn’t immediately dangerous. There was no action taken.

00:46:03 OST

Vincent Sevestre

Representative of parents in La Manche

00:46:16 OST

20 minutes

Paris: 70% of public schools contain asbestos.

00:46:18 BCM

The results of this investigation surprised this asbestos specialist who is associated with the study.

00:46:19 OST

ASBESTOS: 70% OF SCHOOLS AFFECTED IN PARIS

00:46:22 Maxime Misseri

The surprise was finding very high levels in certain cases close to damaged materials. Ordinarily, these materials should have been identified. We should have neutralised or removed them.

00:46:22 OST

MAXIME MISSERI Associate researcher, University of Compiègne

ASBESTOS: 70% OF SCHOOLS AFFECTED IN PARIS

00:46:36 OST

L’humanité

Asbestos in 28.4% of French schools

00:46:37 France 3 Nationale

In Marseille, the results have been shared with the Association for Victims of Asbestos in Schools.

00:46:43 Nathalie Laclau

The more noise we make about this issue, the more the powers that be will act, we hope.

00:46:46 OST

Nathalie Laclau  
Association for Victims of Asbestos in Schools.

00:46:51 OST

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

00:46:51 Mathilde

**The next day, at the National Assembly, deputy Louis Boyard of La France Insoumise calls on the government.**

00:47:02 Louis Boyard

Minister for National Education. A health bomb has just exploded with the investigation by journalists from Green Warriors. This is an emergency. We must find out how many primary school, middle school, and secondary school students, how many school staff, school canteen staff, maintenance staff, etc. have inhaled and continue to breathe in asbestos.

00:47:04 OST

Louis BOYARD  
La France Insoumise – Nupes (Val-de-Marne)

00:47:27 Martin

**We asked Pap Ndiaye, then Minister of Education, for a response. But after several discussions, his team finally declined our request for an interview. We took advantage of an event in his calendar and waited for him by the exit.**

00:47:49 Martin

Hello Minister, Martin Boudot, Green Warriors. What do you think about the 30% of schools that today contain asbestos? And bear in mind this figure is certainly underestimated compared to the reality.

00:47:59 Pap Ndiaye

It’s clear that the health of students and school staff is a concern of the Ministry of National Education and of mine first and foremost. So, the presence of asbestos, which we know has an effect on health, is important to us. We need a precise way of scientifically measuring this phenomenon, at primary school level but also in middle schools and high schools. I’ve instructed our school buildings unit, which handles questions of buildings and building maintenance within the Ministry of National Education, to launch a survey at the start of the academic year in partnership with communities. Of course, we also need those renowned Asbestos Technical Documents so that we can have the clearest picture possible of the asbestos situation.

00:48:52 Martin

What would you say today to the students, parents of students, teachers, and National Education professionals? Is there a risk to their health?

00:49:02 Pap Ndiaye

When there’s asbestos, we know there’s a risk to health. Especially when work is being done, when dust particles are stirred up and may be inhaled by students or staff. That’s why we need tests. There is no way we can underestimate the question of asbestos, to put it to one side or brush it under the carpet. We have to understand this issue. Once again, we don’t yet have all the data, what we do have is outdated. That’s why, of course, the press are playing their part and that’s a good thing. We also need to, in partnership with communities, get a handle on this issue.

00:49:37 Martin

I’ll give you our data. We have information here, I don’t know to what extent that could help you.

00:49:42 Pap Ndiaye

Thank you.

00:49:43 Martin

**Despite Pap Ndiaye’s departure from government, the Ministry confirms that it has started to survey schools containing asbestos. The survey should be made available to the public in the next few months. Since our investigation, the asbestos-ridden classrooms of Vincent Sevestre’s children have been destroyed and the schoolchildren have been moved to another school. When questioned after our findings, several cities like Paris and Marseille have announced greater transparency and plans for fighting asbestos in schools. But the town councils in France are requesting more funds to be able to afford the costs of decontamination.**

00:50:09 OST

Paris

Pre-school

00:50:13 OST

Paris

XI Arrondissement

Public pre-school

00:50:16 OST

French Republic

Liberty Equality Fraternity

00:50:26 Mathilde

**While our country is still paying for this toxic legacy, the asbestos industry continues to prosper. It grew by 7% in 2022, to a market worth a billion euros. But in Geneva, Switzerland, it’s future may be under threat. This morning, under the aegis of the United Nations, 72 countries will decide whether to add certain substances to the list of dangerous products to import and export. Asbestos is one of the materials targeted. Representatives of Kazakhstan have made the trip. As well as this man: Emiliano Alonso, the director of the asbestos lobby group. In spite of several requests, he has refused to meet with us until now. We met him in between two sessions.**

00:50:47 OST

International Conference Centre Geneva CICG

00:51:27 Mathilde

I wanted to ask if you’d be free today for an interview.

00:51:30 Emiliano Alonso

I was informed by my comms team. Thanks very much for your interest but I don’t do interviews.

00:51:37 Mathilde

May I ask why?

00:51:38 Emiliano Alonso

This doesn’t concern me.

00:51:40 Mathilde

Because it’s important to express your point of view.

00:51:42 Emiliano Alonso

This is an internal politics issue.

00:51:43 Mathilde

Okay.

00:51:44 Emiliano Alonso

Thanks very much.

00:51:46 Mathilde

**A few hours later, we try one last time to get his point of view on the results of our investigation.**

00:51:55 Mathilde

Mr Alonso, are you leaving already? It would be a shame to not speak for just 5 minutes. Listen, just, I came to see you because we’ve been investigating asbestos for more than a year. We’ve taken samples to monitor dust in Kazakhstan and French schools, we found lots of chrysotile. I want to ask you if you think this is dangerous for school children, teachers or people in Kazakhstan?

00:52:20 Mathilde

**Emiliano Alonso will remain silent. A victorious silence. His lobby group prevailed. After three days of negotiations, asbestos was not classed as a dangerous product to import or export. The global fight against the carcinogenic insulator is far from over. In Kazakhstan, Viktor Bezvougliak knows this well.**

00:52:48 Viktor Bezvougliak

Nathalie, hello.

00:52:50 Nathalie Laclau

Hello, hello.

00:52:53 Mathilde

**The neighbour of the largest asbestos mine in the word has asked to be put in contact with Nathalie Laclau, the activist who is fighting against asbestos-ridden schools in Marseille.**

00:53:03 Viktor Bezvougliak

How do you do it? What method do you use to make people aware?

00:53:08 Nathalie Laclau

There’s no real trick, the only thing we can do is to simply inform and explain. And that’s what we do, we explain to parents of students that they don’t need to be exposed to much asbestos to fall ill. And when we know something, when we’re aware, we’re more likely to fight against it.

00:53:32 Viktor Bezvougliak

Let’s stay in touch, to keep sharing information, because you’ve already made so much progress and we’ve barely made a start.

00:53:43 Nathalie Laclau

Okay, listen, with please, and I really support what you’re doing.

00:53:52 Mathilde

**We have since sent Viktor Bezvougliak our statements on the presence of asbestos in his town, particularly at the school football ground. The lab found unprecedented levels of asbestos there, tens of millions of fibres per sample. He is getting ready to present the findings to his town council. To speak for the invisible victims and to try to reduce the toxic footprint left by asbestos.**