

NAIROBI, Kenya, February 16, 2009 (ENS) - The Obama administration has reversed the former U.S. position on limiting mercury pollution worldwide. Before astonished environment ministers attending the United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council opening session in Nairobi today, the U.S. delegation endorsed negotiations for a new global treaty to control mercury pollution, to begin this year. The Bush administration had opposed legally binding measures to control mercury, despite broad support among a majority of countries in the UNEP Governing Council. UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner said the mercury policy framework is the result of seven years of intense discussions spearheaded by UNEP represents the first, coordinated global effort to tackle mercury pollution.

"It covers reducing demand in products and processes - such as high intensity discharge vehicle lamps and the chlor-alkali industry - to cutting mercury in international trade," Steiner said. "Other elements include reducing emissions to the atmosphere, environmentally-sound storage of stockpiled mercury and the cleaning-up of contaminated sites." The nervous systems of humans and wildlife are very sensitive to all forms of mercury. Exposure to high levels of mercury can permanently damage the brain, kidneys, lungs, and developing fetus. Effects on brain functioning may result in irritability, tremors, changes in vision or hearing, and memory problems. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has determined that mercuric chloride and methylmercury are possible human carcinogens. Among the 120 other countries that have expressed support for a legally binding agreement on mercury are: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland and Uruguay. Environmental groups from the United States and around the world applauded the U.S. policy change.

"The Obama administration has clearly shown a new day has dawned for U.S. leadership and engagement with the rest of the world," said Michael Bender, director of the U.S.-based Mercury Policy Project, and a coordinator of the international Zero Mercury Working Group. "And the momentum created by the U.S. appears to be galvanizing other governments around the world to step up to address the global mercury crisis." Mercury poisoning affects about five million American women. One study in the United States has found that about one in 12 women have mercury levels above the level considered safe by the U.S. EPA. "Skeptics doubted that the U.S. position on mercury could change so quickly, but the Obama administration made it happen in record time," said Susan Egan Keane of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "They've shown that Obama is serious about a new approach of cooperation and collaboration, rather than obstruction and unilateral action, on the international stage."

Mercury is a persistent, bioaccumulative, transboundary pollutant that contaminates air, soil, water and fish. Of the 6,000 metric tonnes of mercury entering the environment annually, some 2,000 tonnes comes from coal-fired power stations and coal fires in homes, says Steiner. Once in the atmosphere or released down river systems, the toxin can travel for thousands of miles. There are also growing worries that, as climate change melts the Arctic, mercury trapped in the ice and sediments is being re-released back into the oceans and into the food chain. "Because of this potential for global contamination, mercury pollution requires a coordinated international response, including a legally-binding treaty on mercury," said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, project coordinator of the Zero Mercury Campaign at the

European Environmental Bureau. This coalition includes 143 member organizations in 31 European countries. Eating advisories relating to fish consumption remain in place in many European countries warning those at risk including pregnant mothers and babies not to consume fish at the top of the food chain that concentrate mercury from all the smaller fish they have eaten. In Sweden, for example around 50,000 lakes have pike with mercury levels exceeding international health limits. Women of child-bearing years are advised not to eat pike, perch, burbot and eel at all, and the rest of the population only once a week. The UNEP mercury policy framework has the support of 53 countries in Africa. Rico Euripidou of groundWork, Friends of the Earth, South Africa believes that "a comprehensive solution to address mercury will directly benefit Africa through the control of unregulated and uncontrolled flows of mercury onto the continent."

Scientists and the NGO Sharkproject are also now flagging yet another cause for concern - the increased consumption of shark meat in some parts of the world. By some estimates shark meat contains up to 40 times more mercury than recommended food safety limits and perhaps a great deal more, said Steiner. Mercury levels in Arctic ringed seals and beluga whales have increased by up to four times over the last 25 years in some areas of Canada and Greenland with implications for communities where marine mammals are eaten. Steiner says the good news is that both Europe and the United States have in recent months backed export bans on mercury with the European Union setting a date of 2011. The U.S. delegation's proposal on mercury requests the UNEP Executive Director to conduct, concurrent with the work of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, a study to inventory facilities in sectors including coal-fired power plants, cement production, and non-ferrous metals mining and production in major mercury-emitting countries. "For all sectors, but especially coal-combustion, the study should include analysis of the levels of existing emissions controls, and the potential to achieve further mercury emission reductions," the U.S. proposal states. "The study should also assess the costs and effectiveness of alternative control strategies, considering mercury-specific controls, and reductions that can be achieved as a co-benefit from conventional pollution control measures as well as the relationship with actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," the U.S. proposes. The U.S. requests that the report be prepared to inform the work of the second meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, and that the Executive Director report the findings of the study at the 2010 UNEP Global Ministerial Environment Forum.

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