

Introduction/Background: The Zero Mercury Working Group is now here in Nairobi to promote a global legally binding treaty on mercury at the UNEP Governing Council meeting this week, 16-20 February.

The UNEP Executive Director has posted a press release on the UNEP website calling for global action on mercury this week at the Environmental Ministers meeting here.

Here is the link to the UNEP press release By Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director:

<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=562&ArticleID=6077&=en&t=long>

see below for his full release:

Golden Opportunity to Deal With Poisonous Quicksilver Pollution By Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director

This month the world's environment ministers meeting in Nairobi, Kenya can take a landmark decision to lift a global health threat from the lives of literally hundreds of millions of people.

A strategy to begin seriously dealing with the heavy metal mercury and its highly toxic compounds is to come before the UN Environment Programme's Governing Council when it meets from 16 February. The 'policy framework', 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.

Other elements include reducing emissions to the atmosphere; environmentally-sound storage of stockpiled mercury and the cleaning-up of contaminated sites. The ministers equally need to decide how such actions should be realized—some, like the European Union member states are pressing for an international, legally binding treaty whereas others want to accelerate an essentially voluntary approach. Action is long overdue according to our assessments. Mercury's impacts on the human nervous system has been known for over a century—the Mad Hatter of Alice in Wonderland fame was so called because hat-makers used the liquid metal to strengthen brims, breathing in the poisonous fumes.

Eating advisories relating to fish consumption such as tuna remain in place in many countries targeted at those at risk including pregnant mothers and babies. 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. A recent study in West Bengal found fish with mercury levels in excess of food safety limits. One study in the United States has found that about 1 in 12, or just under five million females, have mercury levels above the level considered safe by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Other potential impacts on the population include impaired thyroid and liver function, irritability, tremors, disturbances to vision and memory loss and perhaps cardiovascular problems. Scientists and the NGO Sharkproject are now also flagging yet another cause for concern—the increased consumption of shark meat in some parts of the world. By some estimates these foods contain up to 40 times more mercury than recommended food safety limits and perhaps a great deal more.

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.

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. Meanwhile governments in cooperation with UNEP have spotlighted a wide-range of products and processes once dependent on mercury which now have cost effective, well proven and safer alternatives. The case for others is perhaps less clear cut at least for some manufacturers and economies. High-intensity discharge lamps for use outside the automobile industry, some liquid crystal display units and certain kinds of plastics production spring to mind.

Flexibility needs to be shown. But only by setting a clear and unequivocal landscape of a low mercury future will governments trigger innovation and an ever greater array of cost effective, alternative products and processes. Artisanal and small-scale gold mining is perhaps a special case. The victims are among the poorest people in the world. An estimated 10 million miners and their families may be suffering in fields ranging from Brazil and Venezuela to India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe. On the island of Mindanao, Philippines 70 per cent of gold miners may have chronic mercury intoxication.

Around one third of people not directly employed in the industry, but living in the area, also showed signs of chronic mercury intoxication studies found. The alternative to mercury in small-scale mining is really no alternative at all—it is cyanide. The wider economic arguments are also compelling. We estimate that every kilogramme of mercury taken out of the environment can trigger up to \$12,500 worth of social, environmental and human health benefits.

Meanwhile there is evidence that far from declining, mercury pollution may be on the rise in part as a result of increased coal-burning in Asia. Of the around 6,000 tonnes of mercury entering the environment annually, some 2,000 tonnes comes from power stations and coal fires in homes. Once in the atmosphere or released down river systems, the toxin can travel hundreds and 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. Thus there are clear and positive links between decisions taken by environment ministers at the Governing Council and the ones to be taken later in the year at the crucial UN climate convention meeting in Copenhagen.

No one alive today is free from some level of mercury contamination and the World Health Organization argues there is in the end no safe limit. Thus prevarication and inaction over the global mercury challenge is no longer an option—we owe it to pregnant women and unborn children everywhere and to artisanal miners and their families. We owe it to anyone who has an interest in a healthier, less polluted world.

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