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## **‘Minamata’ Convention Agreed by Nations**

### **Global Mercury Agreement to Lift Health Threats from Lives of Millions World-Wide**

**Geneva/Nairobi, 19 January 2013**--International effort to address mercury—a notorious heavy metal with significant health and environmental effects—was today delivered a significant boost with governments agreeing to a global, legally-binding treaty to prevent emissions and releases.

The Minamata Convention on Mercury—named after a city in Japan where serious health damage occurred as a result of mercury pollution in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century—provides controls and reductions across a range of products, processes and industries where mercury is used, released or emitted.

These range from medical equipment such as thermometers and energy-saving light bulbs to the mining, cement and coal-fired power sectors.

The treaty, which has been four years in negotiation and which will be open for signature at a special meeting in Japan in October, also addresses the direct mining of mercury, export and import of the metal and safe storage of waste mercury.

Pinpointing populations at risk, boosting medical care and better training of health care professionals in identifying and treating mercury-related effects will also form part of the new agreement.

Mercury and its various compounds have a range of serious health impacts including brain and neurological damage especially among the young.

Others include kidney damage and damage to the digestive system. Victims can suffer memory loss and language impairment alongside many other well documented problems.

Initial funding to fast track action until the new treaty comes into force in the expected three to five years' time has been pledged by Japan, Norway and Switzerland.

Support for developing countries is also expected from the Global Environment Facility and a programme once the convention is operational.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) which convened the negotiations among over 140 member states in Geneva, said at the close: "After complex and often all night sessions here in Geneva, nations have today laid the foundations for a global response to a pollutant whose notoriety has been recognized for well over a century."

"Everyone in the world stands to benefit from the decisions taken this week in Geneva-- in particular the workers and families of small-scale gold miners, the peoples of the Arctic and this generation of mothers and babies and the generations to come. I look forward to swift ratification of the Minamata Convention so that it comes into force as soon as possible," he said.

Fernando Lugris, the Uruguayan chair of the negotiations, said : "Today in the early hours of 19 January 2013 we have closed a chapter on a journey that has taken four years of often intense but ultimately successful negotiations and opened a new chapter towards a sustainable future. This has been done in the name of vulnerable populations everywhere and represents an opportunity for a healthier and more sustainable century for all peoples".

Ambassador Franz Perrez of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Switzerland said: "Switzerland, which initiated with Norway the negotiations for a mercury convention, is very pleased about this impressive success. It will help us to protect human health and the environment all over the world and is a proof that multilateralism can work when political will exists."

"This treaty will not bring immediate reductions of mercury emissions. It will need to be improved and strengthened, to make all fish safe to eat," said David Lennett from the Natural Resources Defense Council representing the Zero Mercury Working Group a global coalition of environmental NGOs "Still, the treaty will phase out mercury in many products and we welcome it as a starting point."

The decision to launch negotiations was taken by environment ministers at the 2009 session of the UNEP Governing Council and the final and fifth negotiation took place this week in Geneva.

The scope of the new treaty which puts in controls and also reduction measures in respect to mercury is as follows.

### **Products**

Governments have agreed on a range of mercury containing products whose production, export and import will be banned by 2020.

These include:-

- Batteries, except for 'button cell' batteries used in implantable medical devices
- Switches and relays
- Certain types of compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs)
- Mercury in cold cathode fluorescent lamps and external electrode fluorescent lamps
- Soaps and cosmetics

Certain kinds of non-electronic medical devices such as thermometers and blood pressure devices are also included for phase-out by 2020.

Governments approved exceptions for some large measuring devices where currently there are no mercury-free alternatives.

- Vaccines where mercury is used as a preservative have been excluded from the treaty as have products used in religious or traditional activities
- Delegates agreed to a phase-down of the use of dental fillings using mercury amalgam.

### **Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining**

The booming price of gold in recent years has triggered a significant growth in small-scale mining where mercury is used to separate gold from the ore-bearing rock.

Emissions and releases from such operations and from coal-fired power stations represent the biggest source of mercury pollution world-wide.

Workers and their families involved in small-scale gold mining are exposed to mercury pollution in several ways including through inhalation during the smelting.

Mercury is also being released into river systems from these small-scale operations where it can contaminate fish, the food chain and people downstream.

- Governments agreed that the treaty will require countries to draw up strategies to reduce the amount of mercury used by small-scale miners
- Nations with artisanal and small-scale gold mining operations will draw up national plans within three years of the treaty entering into force to reduce and if possible eliminate the use of mercury in such operations
- Public awareness campaigns and support for mercury-free alternatives will also be part of the plans

### **From Power Stations to Cement Factories**

The new treaty will control mercury emissions and releases from various large industrial facilities ranging from coal-fired power stations and industrial boilers to certain kinds of smelters handling for example zinc and gold.

Waste incineration and cement clinker facilities are also on the list.

Nations agreed to install the Best Available Technologies on new power plants and facilities with plans to be drawn up to bring emissions down from existing ones.

The negotiations were initially looking to set thresholds on the size of plants or level of emissions to be controlled. But it was decided this week to defer this until the first meeting of the treaty after it comes into force.

### **Notes to Editors**

Background to the fifth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to prepare a global legally binding instrument on mercury (**INC5**)

<http://unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Mercury/Negotiations/INC5/tabid/3471/Default.aspx>

*Global Mercury Assessment 2013*

[http://www.unep.org/publications/contents/pub\\_details\\_search.asp?ID=6282](http://www.unep.org/publications/contents/pub_details_search.asp?ID=6282)

*Time to Act*

[http://www.unep.org/publications/contents/pub\\_details\\_search.asp?ID=6281](http://www.unep.org/publications/contents/pub_details_search.asp?ID=6281)

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