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Subject: UNEP GC25/GMEF Concludes in Nairobi

Historic Treaty to Tackle Toxic Heavy Metal Mercury Gets Green Light

Environment Ministers Also Back Global Green New Deal and Green Economy Initiative to Power World to More Sustainable Crisis-Free Future

Nairobi, 20 February 2009 - A global crackdown on the poisonous pollutant mercury was agreed by environment ministers at the end of the UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) Governing Council.

The landmark decision, taken by over 140 countries, sets the stage for the lifting of a major health threat from the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Governments unanimously decided to launch negotiations on an international mercury treaty to deal with world-wide emissions and discharges of a pollutant that threatens the health of millions, from fetuses and babies to small-scale gold miners and their families.

They also agreed that the risk to human health and the environment was so significant that accelerated action under a voluntary Global Mercury Partnership is needed whilst the treaty is being finalized.

The eight-point partnership plan includes:

- Boosting the world-wide capability for nations to safely store stockpiled mercury
- Reducing the supply of mercury from for example primary mining of the heavy metal
- Carrying out awareness raising of the risks alongside projects to cut the use of mercury in artisanal mining where an estimated 10 million miners and their families are exposed
- Reducing mercury in products such as thermometers and high-intensity discharge lamps to processes such as some kinds of paper-making and plastics production

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "UNEP has, for some seven years, coordinated and contributed to an intense scientific and policy debate on how best to deal with the issue of mercury. Today the world's environment ministers, armed with the full facts and full choices, decided the time for talking was over—the time for action on this pollution is now".

"Only a few weeks ago nations remained divided on how to deal with this major public health threat which touches everyone in every country of the world. Today we are united on the need for a legally binding instrument and immediate action towards a transition to a low-mercury world," he said.

"I believe this will be a major, confidence-building boost for not only the chemicals and health agenda but right across the environmental challenges of our time from biodiversity loss to climate change," said Mr Steiner.

Global Green New Deal—Green Economy initiative

He said the mercury decision, alongside a range of other key agreements at the close of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC/GMEF), sent a clear message to citizens everywhere that the environment was moving back to the centre stage of political life and that a Green Economy is up and

running.

“The resounding message is that while the world struggles with the financial and economic crises, the environment must not be side-lined—the challenges but the opportunities are simply too great,” he added.

“Indeed, ministers from North and South here in Nairobi through words and through deeds have signalled that investing in the environment and greening economies is one of the keys to unlocking innovation, job creation, recovery and healthier and more sustainable world—not just on the question of mercury but right across sectors and societies,” said Mr Steiner.

This was underlined by a decision by governments to significantly increase the budget of UNEP at a time of financial and economic crisis.

Underlined too in the summary of the ministerial consultations by Oliver Dulic, Serbia’s Minister of the Environment and President of the Governing Council/GMEF.

“Ministers of the environment must be ministers for sustained economic success. Creating a green economy goes hand-in-hand with sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals,” he said.

Mr Dulic said many of the ministers meeting this week now supported the notion that investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency alongside investments in natural or nature-based assets such as forests and freshwaters could power economies back to health.

“Moving to a green economy is overwhelmingly recognized as a means to deliver multiple benefits for the international community and all nations in addressing food, energy, water security and climate change,” he added.

Ministers agreed that much remained to be done to realize a Green Economy globally and nationally.

But these green shoots of recovery could, with significant additional investment, incentives to scale projects up, setting of the right regulatory framework and improved governance “tilt the policy playing field towards the green economy”.

The ministers also stressed that in order to realize the Green Economy in developing countries support was need including the greening of overseas development aid, bilateral assistance, capacity building and other financial flows alongside greater access to mechanisms such as the UN climate treaty’s Clean Development Mechanism.

Gaza

Environment ministers also backed a decision requesting UNEP to spearhead a mission to Gaza to assess the environmental impacts of recent hostilities and to carry out an economic assessment of the costs of rehabilitating and restoring environmental damage there.

The UNEP team will be deployed “immediately” after a conference in March in Cairo, Egypt, on the reconstruction of Gaza.

Biodiversity and Science

Governments also signalled their determination to rise to the challenge of accelerating biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystems and their multi-trillion dollar services from carbon storage by forests to the coastal defense value of coral reefs.

Today they called on UNEP to hold an international meeting in 2009 to examine the pros and cons of establishing an “Intergovernmental science-policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services” alongside an assessment on the scientific gaps in current knowledge.

The UNEP Executive Director will report on the progress at the special session on biodiversity at the 65th session of the UN General Assembly in 2010.

International Environmental Governance

Governments also decided that a special group of developed and developing countries ministers 'or high-level representatives' be established to develop a set of options aimed at improving the way the world's environmental architecture is run in order to streamline and boost the ability of the global community to tackle persistent and emerging environmental challenges.

Other decisions include UNEP stepping up its work on waste management and support for Africa on climate change including working with the UN Economic Commission for Africa to establish a climate centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Notes to Editors

Decisions and information on the 25th session of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Programme are at <http://www.unep.org/gc/gc25/>

Some facts and figures on mercury:

Mercury's damage to the human nervous system has been known for over a century. Alice in Wonderland's mad hatter echoed the fact that hatters worked with mercury to strengthen brims.

Meanwhile eating advisories relating to fish such as tuna operate in many countries targeted at those at risk including pregnant mothers.

In Sweden 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, turbot and eel at all: the rest of the population only once a week.

In the United States 1 in 12, or just under five million females, have mercury above the level considered safe by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Other potential impacts 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.

Europe and the United States have in recent months backed export bans on mercury—the European Union setting a date of 2011.

Meanwhile governments in cooperation with UNEP have spotlighted a wide-range of products and processes which now have cost effective, proven 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 a clear and unequivocal vision of a low mercury future needs to be set. This will trigger innovation and an ever greater array of cost effective, alternatives.

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 countries from Brazil and Venezuela to India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe from poisoning or exposure.

On the island of Mindanao, Philippines 70 per cent of gold miners may have chronic mercury intoxication.

The wider economic arguments are compelling. UNEP estimates 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. In the atmosphere or released down river systems, the toxin can travel hundreds and thousands of miles.

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.

Everyone alive today has some level of mercury in their bodies. The World Health Organization says there is no safe limit.

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