



## Action on Heavy Metals Among Key Decisions at United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Council Meeting

### *Governments Also Agree to Strengthen UNEP's Finances and Work in Areas from Water and Gender Equality to Disaster Preparedness and Scientific Assessment*

**Nairobi, 25 February 2005** – Governments today took an important step forward in reducing the health and environmental risks from mercury, a heavy metal linked with a wide range of medical problems.

Under an expanded mercury programme, they have asked the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to conduct a study on the amounts of mercury being traded and supplied around the world.

Mercury, a heavy metal linked with effects such as damage to the nervous systems of babies, is used in products such as fluorescent light bulbs, dental fillings and thermometers.

Action is also to be taken on improving the communication of the risks of mercury to vulnerable groups.

These include pregnant mothers whose babies may be at risk if they eat too much mercury-contaminated fish or marine mammals such as seals.

Governments also agreed to promote 'best available techniques' for reducing mercury emissions from chemical factories and other industrial sites.

They agreed to develop partnerships between governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to reduce mercury pollution with the first pilot projects to be in place by September this year.

Likely partnerships include ones to reduce emissions of mercury from coal fired power stations, from chlor-alkali plants and from pollution linked with gold mining.

An estimated 2,000 tonnes of new mercury is released to the environment annually, mainly from coal-fired power stations, waste incinerators and as a result of artisanal mining of gold and silver.

Under the partnerships, governments will make experts and information on environmentally-friendly techniques available to those countries and industries requesting assistance.

The partnership mechanism will also focus on mercury wastes and surplus stockpiles as well as promote research to improve understanding on how mercury moves around the planet.

UNEP has been asked to publicize the success of these partnerships through publicity campaigns and through a dedicated web site.

Governments, who have been attending UNEP's 23rd Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum, also agreed to review the success of the new programme in two years time.

Here they will assess whether further action is needed and, if this is deemed so, review a wide range of options including the possibility of a legally binding treaty.

Well over 1,000 delegates attended from close to 140 countries including Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner and assistant environment minister of Kenya.

Klaus Toepfer, UNEP's Executive Director, said today: "At the start of this Governing Council I called on governments and delegates to take responsibility for the global environment in order to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals on issues such as poverty, water and health".

"I think we can say that they did this, pushing forward on a wide range of fronts including heavy metals, water and sanitation, gender equality and scientific assessments of this ever changing world," he added.

Mr Toepfer said he was pleased that governments had formally adopted the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building which will help focus UNEP's work including support for developing countries on the national level in areas ranging from waste and data gathering to environment law and wildlife.

"We have also been given backing for our work on early warning of disasters and catastrophes including tsunamis," he said.

UNEP's finances have also been strengthened with governments agreeing to core funding for the organization of \$144 million which "is the best it has ever been," said Mr Toepfer.

Indeed, if all sources of funding are calculated, the overall budget for the biennium 2006-2007 is close to \$300 million.

Mr Toepfer said he had also been delighted by the success of the Environment Institute, a new innovation at the Governing Council, which has included training workshops with delegates and guests including members of the Nairobi community.

"We want to be good partners in Kenya and in the city of Nairobi where we are headquartered. I think the contribution of the well attended Environment Institute again underlines this," he added.

Mr Toepfer also applauded the important contribution of civil society who met just before the Governing Council at the Global Civil Society Forum.

Progress on two other heavy metals was agreed today with UNEP requested to conduct a global assessment of cadmium and lead transport.

Governments want to better understand how the two heavy metals move through the atmosphere, seas and rivers in order to establish whether action at a global level is needed to address the health and environment effects.

Cadmium, which is found in products such as batteries, is a known toxin linked with respiratory and gastro-intestinal problems and in acute cases, kidney and skeletal effects.

Lead is linked with a variety of health problems including brain damage in young children and effects on the body's cardiovascular, and reproductive systems.

## Notes to Editors

UNEP produced a global assessment of mercury in February 2003.

The report says that coal-fired power stations and waste incinerators now account for around 1,500 tons or 70 percent of new, quantified man-made mercury emissions to the atmosphere. The lion's share is now coming from developing countries with emissions from Asia, at 860 tons, the highest.

Artisinal mining of gold and silver, which is happening in an increasing number of less developed nations, is another significant source of mercury pollution, releasing an estimated 400-500 tons of mercury annually to the air, soils, and waterways.

Once in the atmosphere, this hazardous heavy metal can travel hundreds and thousands of miles, contaminating places far away from the world's sites where the pollution was originally discharged.

A study of women in the United States, also cited in the new report, has found that about 1 in 12, or just under five million have mercury levels in their bodies above the level considered safe by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Just three years ago, the United States Research Council estimated that about 60,000 babies born each year in the U.S. could be at risk of brain damage with possible impacts ranging from learning difficulties to impaired nervous systems.

However, based on more recent exposure data published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some scientists think the number of at risk babies could be as high as 300,000. Globally the number could run into the millions

The Council also welcomed the offer extended on Monday morning by H.E. Mr. Zeng Peiyan, Vice Premier of the People's Republic of China, to host the second intergovernmental review (IGR) meeting of the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities (GPA) in 2006.

This important event is expected to focus, amongst other things, on assessing how the GPA can be further used to support achievement of the goals and targets associated with the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the Millennium Declaration. The IGR will also provide an important opportunity for different stakeholders at the international, regional and national levels to plan the road to 2014-2015, when the cluster of issues being considered by the Commission on Sustainable Development will include both marine resources and oceans and seas.

The GPA is the only internationally-agreed mechanism in the world addressing the interface between the freshwater and marine environments. It was adopted by 109 Governments and the European Commission in Washington, DC, in 1995, with a first intergovernmental review meeting being held in Montreal in 2001.

**For More Information Please Contact** Eric Falt Spokesman/Director UNEP Division of Communications and Public Information, on Tel: 254 20 623292, Mobile: 254 (0) 733 652656, e-mail [eric.falt@unep.org](mailto:eric.falt@unep.org); or Nick Nuttall, UNEP Head of Media, on Tel: 254 20 623084, Mobile: 254 (0) 733 632755, e-mail [nick.nuttall@unep.org](mailto:nick.nuttall@unep.org);

**UNEP News Release 2005/14**