

Global Agreement on Mercury Pollution Focus of International Meeting

Litmus Test for Governmental Ambitions to Curb Toxic Pollutant Says UN Environment Head

Bangkok/Nairobi, 12 November 2007 -Governments need to accelerate the effort to deliver an international agreement on the poisonous heavy metal mercury Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said today.

Experts are becoming increasingly concerned that increased burning of coal-naturally contaminated with mercury-is leading to releases to the air in some parts of the world from where it can spread around the globe.

The soaring gold price may also be increasing mercury pollution locally and world-wide. The poisonous heavy metal is used to extract gold from ore in many artisanal mining operations which involve millions of workers and their families.

Mr Steiner, also a UN Under-Secretary General, said scientists have been warning about the dangers to human health, wildlife and the wider environment for well over a century.

"And it is true that many countries have, in recent decades, taken steps to reduce mercury uses and releases and to protect their citizens from exposure to this toxic heavy metal," he added.

"However the fact remains that a comprehensive and decisive response to the global challenge of mercury is not in place and this needs to be urgently addressed,"said Mr Steiner.

Mercury is linked with a wide range of health effects including irreversible damage to the human nervous system including the brain and scientists have concluded there is no safe limit when it comes to mercury exposure.

Every person alive today-some 6.5 billion people- is thought to have at least trace levels of the heavy metal in their tissues.

Today governments and experts are meeting in Bangkok under the auspices of the UNEP's Chemicals Branch to discuss how best to reduce environmental sources of mercury with a range of options on the table from voluntary measures and initiatives up to legally binding treaties.

Their report will be presented to environment ministers meeting in February in Monaco attending UNEP's Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum.

UNEP is urging governments, working with industry and civil society, to begin setting "clear and ambitious targets" to get global mercury levels down and to set the stage for mercury-free products and processes world-wide.

Such targets might include:

- an agreement to phase-out mercury from products and processes, such as in the manufacture of medical equipment and in chlorine factories, with an aim of realizing mercury-free products by 2020.
- Reductions in emissions from coal-fired power stations with the additional benefits of reduced greenhouse gases and improved local air quality.
- Support for initiatives like those of the UN Industrial and Development Organization which has a goal to cut by 50 per cent the use of mercury in artisanal mining by 2017 en route to a total phase-out

"The global public has been watching and waiting for action-it is now time to start delivering it. This meeting, aimed at narrowing the options and resolving outstanding concerns, comes against a background of worries over rising levels of mercury emissions and releases in several key areas" said Mr Steiner.

UNEP's flagship report-the Global Environment Outlook-4-launched last month states that that coal burning and waste incineration account for about 70 per cent of the total quantified emissions of mercury.

"As combustion of fossil fuels is increasing, mercury emissions can be expected to increase, in the absence of control technologies or prevention," says the GEO-4, the peer reviewed work of well over 1,000 scientists and experts.

Scientists are also testing suggestions that climate change may be triggering releases of new and re-activation of old deposits of mercury as a result of rising lake temperatures; erosion and the accelerated melting of permafrost, ice sheets and icebergs at the poles.

From here the mercury-in form known as methylmercury- can enter the global food chain via marine mammals such as whales and seals and internationally caught and traded fish such as swordfish, shark, marlin, mackerel, walleye, sea bass and tuna.

The Bangkok "Open-Ended Working Group" meeting-which will also be attended by industry and civil society groups- is expected to be followed up by a second one in late 2008.

Mr Steiner added: "I sincerely hope that at this second meeting, the international community can finally bring closure to the debate about the way forward and open a new chapter of clear, decisive, action on mercury-action that leads to the setting of clear and ambitious targets in order to deliver measurable reductions to protect human health and the wider environment".

"There is no real reason to wait on many of the mercury fronts. Viable alternatives exist for virtually all products containing mercury and industrial processes using mercury," he added.

Notes to Editors

In 2001, governments requested UNEP to produce a global study on mercury. The Global Mercury Assessment report was published in December 2002, and was presented to UNEP's Governing Council in 2003.

- The Governing Council considered the assessment at its 22nd session in February 2003, and:
 - concluded that there was sufficient evidence of significant global adverse impacts from mercury and its compounds to warrant further international action to reduce the risks to human health and the environment
 - decided that national, regional and global actions, both immediate and long-term, should be initiated as soon as possible.
 - urged all countries to adopt goals and take national actions, as appropriate, with the objective of identifying exposed populations and ecosystems, and reducing anthropogenic mercury releases that impact human health and the environment.
 - requested UNEP to initiate technical assistance and capacity building activities to support the efforts of countries to take action regarding mercury pollution
- In 2005, the Governing Council, included the possibility of a legally binding instrument as in its consideration of actions to deal with the significant global adverse impacts of mercury. Governing Council also:
 - requested UNEP to develop a report on the supply, trade and demand for mercury on the global market
 - called for partnerships between Governments and other stakeholders as one approach to reducing risks to human health and the environment from the release of mercury and its compounds to the environment
 - encouraged Governments, the private sector and international organizations to take immediate actions to reduce the risks to human health and the environment posed on a global scale by mercury in products and production processes.
- In February 2007, Governing Council recognised that efforts to reduce risks from mercury were not sufficient to address the global challenges posed by mercury and concluded that further long term international action is required. It called for a review and assessment of the options of enhanced voluntary measures and new or existing international legal instruments in order to make progress in addressing this issue. It also
 - called for strengthening of the UNEP mercury programme partnerships; and
 - established an ad hoc open-ended working group of Governments, regional economic integration organizations and stakeholder representatives to review and assess options for enhanced voluntary measures and new or existing international legal instruments. The open ended working group will report to the GC at its twenty-fifth session of the in 2009.

Further notes:

Mercury has been used in various products and processes for hundreds of years due to its unique chemical properties

Mercury and mercury-containing compounds are highly toxic and have a variety of significant adverse effects on human health, wildlife and the environment.

- In the human body, mercury damages the central nervous system, thyroid, kidneys, lungs, immune system, eyes, gums, and skin
- Neurological damage done by mercury that has reached the brain cannot be reversed. There is no known safe exposure level for elemental mercury in humans, and effects can be seen even at very low levels.
- In recent years, environmental mercury levels have increased.

Once released, mercury can persist in the environment where it can circulate between air, water, sediments, soil and biota in various forms. Atmospheric mercury can be transported long distances in the atmosphere, incorporated by microorganisms and may be concentrated up the food chain. The most common exposure to mercury is through ingestion of fish and other marine species contaminated with methyl-mercury.

- Localized hot spots exist from use of mercury in industrial processes, mining, waste sites, and other air emission point sources.

Artisanal and small scale gold mining uses mercury to collect gold from the ore. The mercury/gold amalgam is then burnt to release the mercury and leave molten gold. This is often done without any protective equipment or way of collecting the mercury, and can lead to local and widespread poisoning of the environment, workers and their families. This industry is expanding due to the rising price of gold, and involves an estimate 10 to 15 million miners worldwide, including 4.5 million women and 1 million children.

Many mercury-containing devices are produced using methods which result in major releases of mercury to the environment.

UNEP Chemicals-Mercury: <http://www.chem.unep.ch/mercury/default.htm>

GEO-4 Media Resources: <http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/media/index.asp>

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