



PRESS RELEASE

World Governments Support Breakthrough Agreement on Mercury

20 February 2009; Nairobi, Kenya – Defying expectations, world environmental ministers agreed today to begin negotiating a treaty to control global mercury pollution. The decision represents the consensus of the more than 140 countries gathered here for the 25th UNEP Governing Council meeting.

“This consensus is a huge relief,” said Elena Lymberidi – Settimo, from the European Environmental Bureau and the Zero Mercury Working Group. “The treaty will ensure that developed nations such as the EU not only carries through on its current mercury commitments, but also goes further to reduce global mercury emissions, supply and demand.”

An intergovernmental negotiating committee has been established to negotiate a treaty which will include actions to reduce mercury supply, its use in products and processes and atmospheric mercury emissions, which will ultimately reduce human exposure to mercury globally. The preparations for negotiations on the global treaty will start later this year with discussions beginning in earnest in 2010 with a view to wrapping up by 2013.

“Developing a treaty is a critical first step towards solving the global mercury crisis,” said Michael Bender of the Zero Mercury Working Group.

The agreement was made possible by a dramatic shift in the US position, which only a couple of months ago maintained its opposition against any treaty on mercury.

Richard Gutierrez, of the Philippine NGO, Ban Toxics! explains the significance of the treaty to developing countries such as the Philippines, “Developing countries will not be left saddled with new legal responsibilities without adequate financial and technical assistance.”

“This is a crucial feature not found in most treaties, and will be pivotal to the success of the treaty on mercury.” added Gutierrez.

Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin that makes its way up the food chain into humans, and puts developing fetuses and young children at risk.

Faye Ferrer of Health Care Without Harm-Southeast Asia (HCWH-SEA) said that this is a very welcome move for the health sector. “With a legally-binding treaty, we are assured that hospitals and health care systems around the world will be backed by solid policies to finally phase-out mercury.”

For further information:-

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Editor’s notes

Mercury is a global pollutant that travels long distances. Its most toxic form – methylmercury - accumulates in large predatory fish and is taken up in our bodies through eating fish, with the worst impacts on babies in utero and small children. For more information, see Zero Mercury Campaign, www.zeromercury.org and “Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” <http://www.env-health.org/r/145>

Endnotes:

European Environmental Bureau, (EEB), www.eeb.org, is a federation of over 140 environmental citizens' organisations based in all EU Member States as well as in neighbouring countries. These organisations range from local and national, to European and international. The aim of the EEB is to protect and improve the environment of Europe and to enable the citizens of Europe to play their part in achieving that goal.

The **Zero Mercury Working Group**, www.zeromercury.org, is an international coalition of over 75 public-interest non-governmental organisations worldwide formed in 2005 by the European Environmental Bureau and the Mercury Policy Project/Ban Mercury Working Group. The group's aim is to reach “Zero emissions, demand and supply of mercury, from all sources we can control, towards eliminating mercury in the environment at EU level and globally.”

International POPs Eliminations Network (IPEN), www.ipen.org, is a global network of health and environmental organizations in more than 80 countries working together for a Toxics-Free Future.

Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), www.noharm.org, is an international coalition of hospitals and health care systems, medical and nursing professionals, community groups, health-affected constituencies, labour unions, environmental and religious organisations. HCWH is dedicated to transforming the health care industry worldwide, without compromising patient safety or care, so that it is ecologically sustainable and no longer a source of harm to public health and the environment