

December 4, 2010

APPEAL

Statement by Minamata Disease Victims and Supporters Toward the Global Treaty on Mercury

Fifty-four years have passed since the official discovery of Minamata Disease. This incident, which began in April 1956 when two young sisters from a small fishing village facing Minamata Bay were reported falling ill, is yet to be resolved. At the end of 1959, there were 79 victims identified. Through the tenacious efforts of victims fighting to win compensation, and, their resolute insistence on the responsibility of the perpetrating company Chisso Corporation, and the Japanese government and Kumamoto prefecture – who negligently failed to prevent the spread of the pollution thus resulting in greatly extending the damage – finally, the full extent of the disaster is being brought to light. Finally, today, over 50,000 people have come forward to report that they are victims of this pollution. However, even this is only part of the full scope of the damage that actually occurred. Finally, it is becoming evident that there are in fact several hundred thousand victims, people who even today because of discrimination and prejudice cannot reveal publicly that they too are victims, and, countless people who have died without being recognized as victims.

Methyl mercury pollution of the Shiranui Sea has wrought deadly and widespread damage to both the residents living around its shores, and the ecology of the entire region. Finally, after over half a century, awareness of the extent of the damage is beginning to awaken. Unfortunately, at the beginning, neither the perpetrator of the pollution nor those who fell victim to it were aware of the extent of the damage that was occurring. People at that time had virtually no comprehension of how deadly methyl mercury pollution is.

Today, still, not only the perpetrating company Chisso, but the Japanese government and Kumamoto prefecture likewise virtually completely lack the commitment to hold a thorough investigation as to who and what is responsible for the Minamata Disease incident or to examine its entire impact. For over half a century, ad-hoc “solutions” have been applied repeatedly, just to get past the impasse of that moment together with superficial measures to “resolve” disputes. That is what caused the second Minamata Disease incident in Niigata, and led to the third and fourth Minamata Disease incidents elsewhere in Japan. Other companies just like Chisso used mercury in Japan, including seven acetaldehyde plants, six vinyl monomer plants, and forty-nine chlor-alkali plants that used the mercury method.

Mercury was in widespread use in Japan until the 1970s. Triggered by the Third Minamata Disease incident, reported in May 1973 to have occurred on the shores of the Ariake Sea, a comprehensive examination of factories using mercury was undertaken in Japan, and,

although after that the use of mercury became more controlled, these countermeasures were applied too late. Investigation examining what kind of damage has really occurred in Japan due to use of mercury is yet to be undertaken.

Worldwide, even more so, there is insufficient awareness that mercury is a hazardous material. For example, mercury is still being used in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) and in a multitude of products. We, as victims of Minamata Disease, are filled with apprehension knowing this reality.

The upcoming global mercury treaty negotiations will be undertaken in Japan amidst the still ongoing and unresolved history of Minamata Disease. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has decided to enact a global mercury treaty in 2013 in order that we may eradicate damage from mercury worldwide. We are filled with hope by the fact that the second session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to Prepare a Global Legally Binding Instrument on Mercury (INC 2) is taking place here in Japan in January 2011 in order to achieve this. We fervently hope that a treaty will be agreed upon and implemented which will truly reflect the lessons learned from the experience of Minamata Disease here in Japan.

Concurrently, we strongly petition the Japanese government to undertake a thorough investigation into who and what is responsible for perpetrating the Minamata Disease incidents and to thoroughly examine the entire scope of the damage, thus leading the way to a genuine resolution of the problem. We also strongly petition the Japanese government to assertively work to attain enactment of a robust global mercury treaty in order that the ravages of Minamata Disease will never, ever, be repeated again.

Minamata Disease Mutual Aid Society

Minamata Disease Victims' Mutual Aid Society

The Collaboration Center for Minamata Disease Victims (NPO)