

From: "YASUMA Takeshi"

To: 'IPEN Network Network'; Zero Mercury Working Group

Sent: Sunday, February 26, 2012 9:04 AM

Subject: Mainichi Daily News/Kyodo Article on our CSO Joint Statement on Minamata Lessons Learned

Dear all,

Mainichi Daily News/Kyodo reported our campaign on our Civil Society Organizations Joint Statement-Japanese Government Needs to Incorporate the Lessons Learned from Minamata into the Mercury Treaty.

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/news/20120225p2g00m0dm008000c.html>

OR

<http://megalodon.jp/2012-0227-1856-09/mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/news/20120225p2g00m0dm008000c.html>

Best regards,

Takeshi

### **FOCUS: Mercury treaty should reflect lessons of Minamata disease**

TOKYO (Kyodo) -- There is growing debate about how to reflect on the lessons learned from Minamata disease in the so-called Mercury Treaty, which is now being discussed with the aim to reduce the use and transfer of mercury in the world to prevent it from damaging the environment and public health.

The treaty is scheduled to be signed in Japan in late 2013. Former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama said in a commemorative ceremony for the Minamata disease victims in 2010 that Japan wants to host a diplomatic conference to adopt the pact and call it the Minamata Treaty to show that it is determined not to repeat the grave damage caused by mercury-poisoning in other countries.

Three rounds of international discussions on the treaty have been held in Sweden, Japan, and Kenya. There will be two more conferences, including one in Uruguay in late June, and a final 2013 session in Japan, with the U.N. Environment Program serving as secretariat.

Despite Hatoyama's passionate commitment, the current draft of the treaty presented at the discussion table does not refer to "the core elements of the lessons learned from Minamata," said a Japanese nongovernmental organization participating in the past negotiations.

In case of mercury contamination, the polluter and the administrative authorities must uncover the full scope of the damage through sufficient probes and disclose full information on it, while assuming the responsibility of compensating the affected people and restoring the contaminated site, said the NGO, the Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution.

"These are the major lessons learned from Minamata, but the draft does not specifically refer to the responsibility that should be assumed by the polluter and the administration," said Takeshi Yasuma, a CACP official.

"If this goes on, the envisaged treaty will not be useful for contamination victims in seeking compensation and restoration of the polluted site and in demanding sufficient investigation and information disclosure about the disaster," the Tokyo-based group argued in a joint statement issued with around 500 individuals and NGOs around the world.

The statement was recently submitted to the environment, foreign and industry ministers of Japan.

The NGOs and those who have supported the victims also said they have concerns that adopting the pact and naming it the Minamata Treaty may create a misunderstanding that the Minamata issues are settled.

The Minamata disaster in Japan was caused by chemical maker Chisso Corp. dumping mercury-laced wastewater into Minamata Bay. It is still unknown how many people have been tainted, even 56 years after it was officially recognized, as intensive medical checkups in and around the affected areas in Kumamoto and Kagoshima prefectures have not been conducted so far.

A similar disease was confirmed in Niigata Prefecture later, which was caused by a Showa Denko K.K. plant dumping wastewater.

The government introduced redress measures for uncertified patients in 2010, featuring a lump-sum of 2.1 million yen and monthly medical allowances, to which more than 50,000 people have applied.

Compared with this, the number of officially recognized patients is only around 3,000, of whom three quarters have already died.

It has been pointed out that there must be more potential patients who may develop symptoms later as they age, but the government has decided to stop accepting applications at the end of July.

Criticizing the decision, Kenji Utsunomiya, president of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, said in a statement that it is "premature" to set the deadline as it will lead to "deserting potential victims."

Moreover, it has not yet been decided how to deal with around 1.5 million cubic meters of methylmercury-containing dredged sludge that has reclaimed part of Minamata Bay.

Improving the iron wall holding the sludge, including antiseismic reinforcements, is one of the major challenges as it is only durable for about 50 years, according to local authorities.

Yasuma said these Minamata issues should be resolved so the envisaged pact will deserve to be called the Minamata Treaty, and he expects Japan, which has dealt with the Minamata issues "to take the initiative in making the treaty suited to the name."

Teruyoshi Hayamizu, head of the Environment Ministry's Environmental Health and Safety Division, said, "It is significant to name the pact the Minamata Treaty as it will enable the world to preserve the experiences of Minamata," while indicating that it is one of the agenda of how to put regional issues into international efforts to tackle mercury-related problems.

As part of its effort to share its experiences of Minamata with the international community, Japan compiled a booklet, "Lessons from Minamata Disease and Mercury Management in Japan," in Japanese and six other languages -- Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish -- to be distributed at the treaty meetings, according to Hayamizu.

On the expansion of Minamata disease, the booklet notes, "The government's failure to prevent the harmful impact on human health from increasing, due to not taking strict measures against the responsible companies for a long time, still provides valuable lessons today."

"It shows how important it is to take countermeasures quickly, as well as how preventive measures should be taken even when there is scientific uncertainty over the cause of the problem," it says.

Hayamizu also said the government is willing to hold a seminar in Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, following the one last June, after the Uruguay meeting to explain the development of the negotiations to the Minamata people and exchange views on the treaty with them.

In Minamata, meanwhile, Yoichi Tani, 63, keeps a cool eye on the development of the negotiations.

"The ongoing talks must aim at mediating the differences among the countries before concluding the treaty. Thus, there must be a gap between their realistic decisions and the ideals of the local people (of Minamata)," said Tani, who has supported the victims for more than 40 years in the field.

"But I expect the international community to share its knowledge about the hazardous nature of mercury, based on the experiences of Minamata, and I hope the conclusion of the Minamata Treaty will not close the curtain on the Minamata issue as the whole picture of this issue remain unexplained," he said.

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Takeshi YASUMA  
Coordinator  
Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution (CACCP)  
Z Bldg. 4F, 7-10-1 Kameido, Koto-ku,  
Tokyo, 136-0071, Japan  
TEL/FAX +81-3-5836-4358  
E-mail: [ac7t-ysm@asahi-net.or.jp](mailto:ac7t-ysm@asahi-net.or.jp)  
<http://www.ne.jp/asahi/kagaku/pico/>

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