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New global treaty cuts mercury emissions and releases, sets up controls on products, mines and industrial plants

Japan among the first to sign Minamata Convention on Mercury

Kumamoto, Japan, 10 October 2013: Japan, a country which has come to epitomize mercury poisoning in modern times, today became one of the first countries to sign a historic new international convention to reduce emissions and releases of the toxic metal into air, land and water and to phase out many products that contain mercury.

The Minamata Convention on Mercury – a global, legally binding treaty which opened for signature today – was agreed to by governments in January and formally adopted as international law today.

The new treaty is the first new global convention on environment and health for close to a decade. Coming at a time when some multilateral negotiations have faced challenges, its successful negotiation, after a four-year process, provides a new momentum to intergovernmental cooperation on the environment.

Its agreement is also significant in that many countries, despite the lingering effects of the global financial crisis, remained prepared to commit resources to combating the harmful effects of mercury.

Countries began the recognition for this new treaty at a special ceremonial opening of the Diplomatic Conference in Minamata, the city where many local people were poisoned in the mid-20th Century after eating mercury-contaminated seafood from Minamata Bay. As a consequence, the neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning has come to be known as Minamata Disease.

But the Minamata that delegates visited yesterday during a special field trip from the main conference venue in nearby Kumamoto City, is a vastly different place to that affected by mercury in the mid-1950s. Since then the city has remodelled itself as an eco-city, receiving international recognition for its wide range of recycling and environmental programmes.

The Minamata Convention provides for controls and reductions across a range of products, processes and industries where mercury is used, released or emitted. The treaty also addresses the direct mining of mercury, export and import of the metal, and safe storage of waste mercury.

Pinpointing populations at risk, boosting medical care and better training of health-care professionals in identifying and treating mercury-related effects will all result from adherence to the obligations of the new treaty.

“The Minamata Convention will protect people and improve standards of living for millions around the world, especially the most vulnerable,’’ United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said in an address read to the conference. “Let us strive to achieve universal adherence to this valuable new instrument, and advance together toward a safer, more sustainable and healthier planet for all.”

“Mercury has some severe effects, both on human health and on the environment. UNEP has been proud to facilitate and support the treaty negotiation over the past four years because almost everyone in the world – be they small-scale gold miners, expectant mothers or waste-handlers in developing countries – will benefit from its provisions,” said Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Under-Secretary General of the United Nations.

Global action on mercury was agreed to in a landmark decision at the United Nations Environment Programme’s Governing Council meeting in 2009.

Governments unanimously decided to launch negotiations on an international mercury treaty to deal with world-wide emissions and discharges of the pollutant, which threatens the health of millions, from foetuses and babies to small-scale gold miners and their families.

Mercury's impacts on the human nervous system have been known for more than a century: the Mad Hatter of Alice in Wonderland fame was so called because hat-makers used the liquid metal to strengthen brims, breathing in the poisonous fumes.

Other potential impacts include impaired thyroid and liver function, irritability, tremors, disturbances to vision, memory loss and cardiovascular problems.

“With the signing of the Minamata Convention on Mercury we will be going a long way in protecting the world forever from the devastating health consequences from mercury,” says WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan. “Mercury is one of the top ten chemicals of major public health concern and is a substance which disperses into and remains in ecosystems for generations, causing severe ill health and intellectual impairment to exposed populations.”

Governments successfully completed their negotiations at the fifth session of the intergovernmental negotiating committee to prepare a global legally binding instrument on mercury, held in Geneva from 13 to 18 January 2013. They agreed to the text of the “Minamata Convention on Mercury”, which has now been presented for adoption and opened for signature at the Conference of Plenipotentiaries Diplomatic Conference, taking place at Hotel Nikko in Kumamoto and in Minamata, Japan, from 9 to 11 October 2013.

The Diplomatic Conference was preceded by an intergovernmental preparatory meeting on 7 and 8 October 2013 in Kumamoto.

Some key facts about the Diplomatic Conference:

- Over 1,000 participants
- Convention adopted by 139 governments
- Convention signed by 87 governments

Treaty provisions

Under the provisions of the Minamata Convention, Governments have agreed on a range of mercury-containing products whose production, import and export will be banned by 2020. These items have non-mercury alternatives that will be further phased in as these are phased out. They include:

- Batteries, except for 'button cell' batteries used in implantable medical devices
- Switches and relays
- Some compact fluorescent lamps
- Mercury in cold cathode fluorescent lamps and external electrode fluorescent lamps
- Soaps and cosmetics (mercury is used in skin-whitening products)
- Some mercury-containing medical items such as thermometers and blood pressure devices.

Mercury from small-scale gold-mining and from coal-fired power stations represent the biggest source of mercury pollution worldwide. Miners inhale mercury during smelting, and mercury run-off into rivers and streams contaminates fish, the food chain and people downstream. Under the Minamata Convention, Governments have agreed that countries will draw up strategies to reduce the amount of mercury used by small-scale miners and that national plans will be drawn up within three years of the treaty entering into force to reduce – and if possible eliminate – mercury.

The Convention will also control mercury emission and releases from large-scale industrial plants such as coal-fired power stations, industrial boilers, waste incinerators and cement clinkers facilities.

Editors' notes

The full text of the treaty can be found here

For more information about the Diplomatic Conference, please see here

For a list of the countries that have signed the Convention so far, please see (from 10 October) www.mercuryconvention.org.

For more information about the effects of mercury, please click here

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