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Indonesia may be undermining global mercury agreement

Groups urge gov't to close all mercury mines, report supply and trade

Jakarta, Indonesia, 9 March 2016—Indonesia's lax stance on mercury mining and trade is undermining an important global treaty meant to protect health and the environment, environmental groups said today in a statement released at the opening of a UN meeting on the Minamata Convention on Mercury this 10-15 March in Amman, Jordan.

The groups BaliFokus and BAN Toxics are urging the Widodo administration to close all mercury mines, report production, supply and trade data, and follow through with the phase out of mercury in artisanal and small scale gold mining (ASGM).

“Indonesia is flailing haplessly in the midst of a rising mercury crisis”, said Yuyun Ismawati of BaliFokus. “Despite being a signatory to the Minamata Convention, meant to phase out the local mercury mining production and clamp down on illegal use, Indonesia is sticking its head in the sand on stopping new small-scale mercury mines, and is hapless in illegal mercury trade and smuggling in its territory.”

The Minamata Convention on Mercury, agreed in 2013, signed by 128 countries and ratified by 23 nations thus far, is a treaty that protects human health and environment from mercury pollution. The treaty bans new mercury mines, places control measures on air emissions, imposes regulations on artisanal and small-scale gold mining, and enforces the phase out of existing mines and products. The meeting in Jordan this week is the seventh session of the intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC) on mercury which meets to agree on the finer details of the agreement. This is the last meeting before the Convention enters into force, once 50 countries ratify it.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that is persistent and is known to bioaccumulate, posing the greatest risks to developing children, coastal populations and millions of small scale gold miners using mercury around the globe.

Aside from being a producer and exporter, Indonesia is a mercury emissions hotspot. Much of the mercury produced and smuggled into the country is used in ASGM where the element contaminates, and spreads through, the air, water and soil. There are an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 small scale miners in the country including thousands of children who are continuously exposed to mercury, causing dysfunctional neurological development, brain damage and IQ loss.

Meanwhile, mercury being smuggled out of Indonesia is being used in ASGM in neighbouring countries such as the Philippines. In 2015 at least 35 tons of mercury from Indonesia has found its way into Hong Kong, and a plan to export cinnabar ore from an unknown site have been confiscated by the Indonesian Customs last year. However, as in the case of most countries, Indonesia's mercury production and trade data is generally inaccurate or underreported.

“Illegal trade of mercury should not be taken lightly,” said Shalimar Vitan of BAN Toxics. “There are serious consequences when mercury is traded, used and subsequently released into the environment.”

“To effectively control and manage mercury trade, countries need to start identifying and quantifying their mercury potential sources including by-products from the extractive industries. They need to be transparent about their production volumes, stockpiles, who is exporting and how much to which nations,” she added.

“Indonesia can reverse this trend and make a big difference in Asia and lead countries in proactively upholding the Minamata Convention. President Jokowi can do better.” concluded Yuyun.

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