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EU-funded study shows dangerous lead levels in households paints in Sri Lanka

Colombo, Sri Lanka; Despite new lead in paint regulation limiting lead content in household paints to 600 ppm, most paints available in Sri Lanka still contain unsafe levels of lead, according to a new study released today. The study also suggests that certain brands of paints have lowered lead levels since the last paint analysis was conducted by the Centre for Environmental Justice in 2009.

“Exposure to even small amounts of lead can reduce a child’s intelligence and school performance. Lead can also cause increased violent behavior, so high levels of lead in paint are a cause for serious concern not only for families, but the country as a whole. This damage is lifelong and irreversible”, said Hemantha Withanage, CEJ Executive Director.

Painted surfaces deteriorate with time and when disturbed; lead from the paint then contaminates household dust and soils surrounding the home. Children ingest lead from dusts and soils during normal hand to mouth behavior. Damage to children’s intelligence and mental development occurs, even when there are no obvious or clinical signs of lead poisoning. Recent World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines indicate that there is no known acceptable lead exposure level for children.¹ A recent study investigating the economic impact of childhood lead exposure on national economies estimated a total cumulative loss of \$977 billion international dollars per year for



Centre for Environmental Justice based in Sri Lanka is a partner organization of the Asia Lead Paint Elimination Project, a project of IPEN.



IPEN is an international organization promoting safe chemical policies and practices that protect human health and the environment.



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¹ *Blood Levels in Children Aged 1-5 Years – United States, 1999-2010*, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6213a3.htm?s_cid=mm6213a3_w

all low and middle income countries, and \$700 billion loss in Asia.²

The average concentration of lead in the analyzed paints was 11,600 ppm. Lead concentrations above 10 000 ppm were found in [in percentage terms] of the paint samples analyzed; The highest concentration detected was 131 000 ppm in an imported paint brand from India.

The levels of lead in household paints in Sri Lanka have been regulated since 1 January, 2013 by an order of the Consumer Affairs Authority. Permissible maximum total lead contents vary from 90 to 600ppm depending on the type of paint.

This law was the result of a case filed by the Centre for Environmental Justice in 2009. The study released today shows paints with high lead levels are still available in the Sri Lankan market, while some even violate the regulations established on 1 January 2013.

"It is our pride that we have the mandatory standards next to U.S. standards among all the Asian countries. But so far the Consumer Affairs Authority has failed to implement the law", said Hemantha Withanage.

"Switching to un-lead paint is simply a matter of selecting un-lead raw materials. This process can be made stronger with proper implementation of the existing law", Said, Chalani Rubesinghe, Environmental Officer at CEJ.

CEJ purchased 94 cans of household decorative paints and sent samples of the paints to Certottica laboratory in Italy. Certottica is accredited by ACCREDIA – the Italian Accreditation System, which is the Italian National Accreditation Body appointed by the State. This laboratory also participates in the Environmental Lead Proficiency Analytical Testing (ELPAT) program operated by the American Industrial Hygiene Association.

The study was conducted in coordination with the IPEN Lead Paint Elimination Project, which is being implemented in seven countries (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand) with European Union (EU) funding of EUR 1.4 million (about Rs. 245 million) over a period of three years. The Center for Environmental Justice is implementing the project in Sri Lanka.

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CEJ (Centre for Environmental Justice) conducts projects and programs in the areas of science, law and advocacy and provides free legal aid and trainings to marginalized communities to protect their environmental rights.

IPEN Lead Paint Elimination Project is working in seven Asian countries to eliminate lead in paint and raise widespread awareness among business entrepreneurs and consumers about the adverse human health impacts of lead-based decorative paints, particularly on the health of children under six years old.

² *Economic Costs of Childhood Lead Exposure in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*, by Teresa M. Attina and Leonardo Trasande: Environmental Health Perspectives; DOI:10.1289/ehp.1206424; <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/1206424/>

The seven Asian countries are Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The project includes periodical analyses of lead concentrations in paints; information and support to small- and medium-sized paint manufacturers, dealers, retailers to help them to shift from lead-based to lead-free paints; third party certification and labeling that includes information on lead; help to government institutions to enact the standard for lead in paints; preparation and dissemination of awareness materials and mass awareness raising programs about lead paint and their impact especially on children health and environment etc.

IPEN is a leading global organization working to establish and implement safe chemicals policies and practices that protect human health and the environment around the world.

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