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High Lead Levels Found in Majority of Malaysian Paint Brands

(Penang, Malaysia) More than sixty percent of paint brands analyzed in a new study on total lead in solvent-based decorative paints contained high lead levels, and at least one paint from most brands contained exceedingly high lead levels. The findings are included in a report released today by the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) and IPEN. Moreover, consumer information about lead content was missing from most paint can labels, and a number of brands falsely advertised themselves as "low lead."

"The health impacts of lead exposure on young children's brains are lifelong, irreversible and untreatable," said S.M. Mohamed Idris, President of CAP. "We are limiting our children and our nation's future intellectual development even though safe and effective alternatives are already in use and widely available in Malaysia. We must reduce this critical source of lead exposure to young children."

"Continued use of lead paint is a primary source of childhood lead exposure," said Dr. Sara Brosché, Global Lead Paint Elimination Project Manager of IPEN. "Children – especially those under 6 years of age – ingest or inhale lead through exposure to dust or soil contaminated with lead-based paint and normal hand-to-mouth behavior. Lead is also introduced into the gastrointestinal tract when children chew on objects such as toys, household furniture or other articles painted with lead paint. We must enact government regulations on the use of lead in paint in order to minimize childhood lead exposure and safeguard their health. But paint companies do not need to wait for regulation; they can and should act now."

There is currently no regulation in Malaysia limiting the amount of lead in paint for household and decorative use. Most highly industrial countries adopted laws or regulations to control the lead content of decorative paints—the paints used on the interiors and exteriors of homes, schools, and other child-occupied facilities—beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. The strictest standard, 90 parts per million (ppm) total lead content in decorative paint, is common in many countries, including the Philippines, Nepal and the United States of America (USA). Several other countries, including Singapore and Sri Lanka, have a 600 ppm total lead standard.

In September 2015, CAP purchased a total of 39 cans of solvent-based, enamel decorative paints representing 18 brands from stores in Penang and Kedah. Samples from these paints were analyzed by an accredited laboratory in the USA for total lead content.

Key findings from the report, *Lead in New Enamel Household Paints in Malaysia*, include:

- Sixteen out of 39 enamel decorative paints (41 percent of paints) contained a total lead concentration above 600 ppm. Moreover, twelve paints (31 percent of paints) contained dangerously high concentrations of lead above 10,000 ppm. The highest lead concentration detected was 150,000 ppm, whilst the lowest was less than 60 ppm.
- Eleven of 18 analysed brands (61 percent of brands) sold at least one paint with lead concentrations above 10,000 ppm, including brands from multinational companies.

- Yellow paints were the most hazardous with 12 of 19 samples (63 percent of yellow-coloured paints) containing lead concentrations greater than 10,000 ppm. In addition, this study also included 12 samples of red paints and eight white paints.
- In general, paint can labels did not carry meaningful information about lead content or the hazards of paint with high lead content and some paints with high lead concentrations were falsely advertised as being “low lead.”

The World Health Organization (WHO) calls lead paint “a major flashpoint” for children’s potential lead poisoning and says that “since the phase-out of leaded petrol, lead paint is one of the largest sources of exposure to lead in children.” Children are exposed to lead, when painted surfaces deteriorate over time and contaminate household dust and soils. Children, ages 0-6, engaging in normal hand-to-mouth behaviors are most at risk of damage to their intelligence and mental development from exposure to lead dust and soil.

The Malaysian paint and coating sector is dominated by large multinational corporations manufacturing coatings for a large range of products from architectural coatings to special purpose coatings. Local firms predominantly produce architectural coatings, while some also produce industrial coatings.

Two previous paint studies conducted in Malaysia in 1992 and 2004 reported results similar to findings released today.

Key recommendations made in the report include:

- **Government:** Promulgate and enforce regulation to ban lead in paint.
- **Industry:** Stop the use of lead-based pigments, driers, and substances used for other purposes in paint formulations, and shift to non-hazardous substitutes.
- **Consumers:** Only purchase and use unleaded paints for healthier homes, and patronise businesses that sell unleaded paints.

This study also found that some companies have falsely advertised their product as “lead free” or “contains no added lead”. Stringent enforcement is needed to take action against this type of violation and for misleading consumers. We urge the Malaysian government to take immediate measures to eliminate lead in paint.

S.M. MOHAMED IDRIS
President, Consumers’ Association of Penang (CAP)

Note to the Editor: The paint study was undertaken as part of IPEN’s Global Lead Paint Elimination Campaign. **IPEN** is an international NGO network comprised of 700 organizations in 116 countries that work to reduce and eliminate hazardous, toxic substances internationally and within their own countries. (www.ipen.org). CAP, based in Malaysia, is a fearless advocate of the people's right to a healthy and sustainable environment, challenging the unsustainable model of production and wasteful consumption patterns.

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