



For Immediate Release
For More Information

10 October 2013
Bjorn Beeler
+1 510-710-0655 / bjornbeeler@ipen.org
Twitter: @ToxicsFree / Website: www.ipen.org

To Tackle ASGM, Mercury Treaty Should Apply Lessons from the Minamata Tragedy

(Kumamoto, Japan) The world's first international mercury treaty should address mercury in artisanal small-scale gold mining (ASGM) by applying the lessons from the Minamata tragedy, the International NGO IPEN said today.

“Future Minamata’s are in the making, as we speak, in almost 80 developing countries, each with hundreds of small-scale gold mining sites. These sites are the largest source of mercury air emissions and intentional mercury use in the world, and we are already seeing harm from mercury pollution in women, young children, families and communities,” said Yuyun Ismawati, Senior Advisor of BaliFokus, Indonesia and IPEN lead for ASGM/Mining issues.

IPEN recommends applying four key lessons from the Minamata mercury poisoning tragedy to actions on ASGM:

- 1. Act now, before the problem becomes acute.** Already we are beginning to see signs of mercury poisoning in gold mining communities; in women, children and men. We do not need to wait 20 years, as they did in Minamata, to confirm what we are seeing. The cost of inaction is too high. There are alternatives to mercury and we should begin using them now.
- 2. Understand and monitor mercury use in cities, towns and nations.** Unlike the Minamata tragedy, mercury sources in ASGM are widely dispersed. The only way to control this source of pollution is to progressively restrict and eliminate mercury supply to small-scale gold miners. Restriction of supply will gradually raise the price gold miners must pay for mercury and thereby encourage them to move to reduce and eliminate mercury use. Countries should stop exporting harm to other countries.
- 3. Do not wait 20 years to manage contaminated sites.** The cleanup of contaminated sites in Minamata began 20 years after the problem was discovered. That was too late. Governments must begin planning now to anticipate and prevent similar contamination at ASGM sites. Otherwise, the legacy of the current worldwide gold rush will be thousands of highly contaminated sites and devastated communities around the world. “Eco Parks” are not the answer; nor will there be money available to build them.
- 4. Mercury poisoning is preventable.** No one should be poisoned by mercury. If we monitor mercury levels in people working in communities where mercury is being used, we can act before they are harmed.

“The mercury treaty represents a global consensus that mercury pollution presents a serious threat to human health and the environment and that coordinated global action is required to address it. Some treaty provisions are legally-binding obligations and others require governments to “endeavor” to take action. This means that each government has a moral, if not a legal, commitment to fully implement all treaty provisions,” said Joe DiGangi, IPEN Senior Science and Technical Advisor.

IPEN is an international NGO comprised of 700 organizations in 116 countries that work to minimize, and whenever possible, eliminate, hazardous, toxic substances internationally and within their own countries. IPEN has been actively involved in the three-year mercury treaty negotiation process.

See: www.ipen.org & Twitter: @ToxicsFree