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Mercury Treaty Should Resolve Issues in Minamata City and at Future “Minamata” Sites around the World

(Kumamoto, Japan) The world’s first international mercury treaty should spur governments to make the name “Minamata” synonymous with the successful resolution of a serious health and environmental crisis, the international NGO IPEN said today. Issues raised by Minamata victims for nearly thirty years should be finally addressed, and all governments must act quickly to avoid future “Minamata” tragedies now developing in other parts of the world.

“The Mercury Treaty is particularly connected to Minamata because it specifically calls on governments around the world to learn and apply the lessons from the Minamata tragedy to prevent mercury poisoning in the future. But governments cannot be asked to implement the lessons from Minamata if those same lessons remain unresolved in Minamata,” said Joe DiGangi, IPEN’s senior science and technical adviser.

“Future Minamata’s are in the making, as we speak, in 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 young children, families and communities,” said Yuyun Ismawati, Senior Adviser, BaliFokus, and IPEN lead for ASGM/Mining.

“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,” DiGangi said.

In Minamata this means recognition and compensation for all victims as well as clean-up of all contaminated areas, including the 1.5 million cubic meters of toxic mercury waste “temporarily” stored at the Eco-Park. It also means implementing the principle of “polluter pays” and conducting a comprehensive, independent, systematic health study in impacted areas. Japan should halt mercury exports to developing countries and all countries should move quickly to identify and reduce their largest sources of mercury pollution.

“All around the world there are beautiful places like Minamata where serious toxic pollution problems happen quietly over time. In the future, my hope is that the Minamata name will not just be associated with a tragedy, but also become a positive model for implementing the Mercury Treaty by resolving the world’s worst case of mass mercury poisoning,” DiGangi concluded.

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.

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