



a toxics-free future

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Mercury Treaty Must Reduce Global Emissions ***Controversy grows over proposed name, Minamata Convention***

(Geneva) – The health of current and future generations depends on an international mercury treaty that will ensure substantial reductions in global mercury emissions, said [IPEN](#), a coalition of non-governmental organizations representing 700 public-interest organizations in 116 countries.

IPEN and Minamata survivor groups also asked delegates to name the treaty the “Mercury Convention”, instead of the proposed name, “Minamata Convention” – a reference to the site of the first well-documented incident of large-scale mercury poisoning in a human population that occurred more than 50 years ago. Objections to the Minamata name have been raised by five Japanese organizations representing victims of the tragedy, some government delegates, and the Minamata City Council.

“Many Minamata victims oppose the proposed name because they have been denied compensation and 1.5 million m³ of mercury-contaminated sludge remains at the site, “ said Yoichi Tani, Collaboration Center for Minamata Disease Victims in Minamata, Japan. “How can we in good conscience accept the name Minamata Convention when mercury-related injustices continue to plague Minamata?”

IPEN noted that there are examples of treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity that are not named after a city. In addition, there are growing concerns that the new treaty cannot meet the expectations implied by the proposed name: “Minamata Convention.”

“If the global mercury treaty is named the “Minamata Convention” it should, at a minimum, be sufficient to: prevent future outbreaks of Minamata disease, respond adequately when mercury poisoning does occur, and be capable of significantly reducing global levels of mercury pollution in fish and sea food worldwide,” said Dr. Olga Speranskaya, IPEN Co-Chair. “If the new treaty is not sufficiently robust to justify this name, we advocate for a simpler, clearer name, the Mercury Convention.”

New reports from both United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and IPEN raise concerns about growing mercury levels around the world. [Mercury, Time to Act](#), released by UNEP last week found that man-made mercury levels in the top 100 metres of the world’s oceans have doubled over the last one hundred years. The UNEP report also predicts that parts of Africa, Asia and South America could see increasing emissions of mercury into the environment, due mainly to the use of the toxic element in small-scale gold mining, and through the burning of coal for electricity generation.

A new report from IPEN and Biodiversity Research Institute found that increases in mercury emissions are already having an effect. [Global Mercury Hotspots](#), found that mercury levels in humans and fish around the world regularly exceed health advisory levels. For example, mercury concentrations in tested fish on the market in Japan and Uruguay were so high that no consumption is recommended based on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guidelines. Fish tested in many other regions should not be consumed more than one time a month according to consumption guidelines. Similarly, human hair samples showed unsafe mercury levels in people. In Thailand, for example, 20 out of 20 tested individuals living near an industrial site had unsafe levels; 19 out of 20 Indonesians at a gold mining site exceeded EPA recommended levels; and 18 out of 20 individuals in Tokyo, Japan had similarly high levels. National and international press [outlets](#) are beginning to catch on to this global problem.

“We found that fish and human hair from around the world regularly exceeded health advisory levels,” DiGangi said. “The results demonstrate the need for a mercury treaty that mandates true reductions of mercury emissions – not just to air but to land and water as well. Mercury is a large and serious global threat to human health that requires a robust and ambitious global response.”

Human activities such as small-scale gold mining, burning coal, mining and refining metal ores, the manufacture of cement, and vinyl chloride monomer production can release very large amounts of mercury into the environment. Much of this mercury volatilizes into the atmosphere and travels around the globe, eventually falling back to the earth or ocean causing widespread, global mercury deposition.

When mercury falls into the ocean and waterways, microorganisms transform it into an especially toxic form of mercury, methylmercury, which then becomes part of the food chain. Methylmercury is readily absorbed by the body and people are exposed primarily through the consumption of fish. Mercury in fish is widely recognized to be a significant threat to human health, livelihoods, and the environment.

The dangers of mercury poisoning have been known for centuries. Exposure to high levels of mercury can permanently damage the brain and kidneys. Mercury can also be passed from a mother to her developing foetus and this can result in brain damage, reduced intelligence and mental retardation.

IPEN's mission is a toxics-free future for all. The IPEN network is comprised of more than 700 public-interest organizations in 116 countries. IPEN leaders include grassroots activists and nationally and internationally recognized experts in the fields of science, health, environment and public policy. www.ipen.org