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New UNEP Study Finds High Lead Levels in Paints Around the World

New Data Shows Market Leaders in Six Asian Countries Have Shifted to Low Lead Products, Though Overall Lead in Paint Levels Remain High

[Berkeley, U.S./Gothenburg, Sweden] Despite bans on lead in household paint in most Western countries, a new study from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) finds that the majority of paints tested in nine, geographically diverse, developing and transition countries would not meet regulatory standards established in most highly industrialized countries and, in some cases, contain astonishingly high and dangerous levels of lead. New data from seven Asian countries reveals similar results, but also show that paint companies with the largest market share in those countries have largely shifted to unleaded products in recent years.

“When [IPEN](http://www.ipen.org) and its partners began analyzing paint in Asia in 2007, most of the enamel decorative paints tested had extremely high levels of lead. Studies conducted in 2013 show that most of the major producers are now producing low lead products. This is what makes UNEP’s report today so important. Until there is evidence of high lead content of household paints, it is difficult to make consumers aware or urge industry and governments to act,” said Sara Brosche, IPEN Project manager, IPEN Asian Lead Elimination Project. IPEN is a global network of health and environmental non-governmental organizations that has in collaboration with partners collected and analyzed decorative paints in more than thirty developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

The [UNEP report](#) analyzed enamel decorative paints from nine countries: Argentina, Azerbaijan, Chile, Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Tunisia and Uruguay. The new Asian studies come from: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (with a study from India soon to follow). They are a follow-up to earlier studies conducted by IPEN and its partners starting in 2007 as a part of ongoing national lead paint elimination campaigns.

“In this day and age, it is quite frankly breathtaking that parents painting their child’s nursery a cheerful red, or handing their child a colourful toy may, through no fault of their own, be exposing that child to a pernicious and damaging toxin: lead,” said Nick Nuttall, UNEP’s Spokesperson and Director of Communications.

Key findings from the nine-country UNEP report include:

- Countries with regulatory frameworks for lead in paint generally exhibit lower lead paint levels, in this case Chile and Uruguay
- In five of the nine countries, more than half of the decorative paint samples analyzed had lead content greater than 600 parts per million (ppm) lead, the regulatory limit in many other countries.
- In each of the other seven countries, however, two or more of the samples of enamel decorative paints had dangerously high lead content greater than 10,000 ppm.
- In four countries, at least one of the decorative paints tested had a lead concentration at or above 99,000 ppm lead
- Despite the high levels of lead—which is often added as a pigment in bright colors such as yellow, orange, green and red—only 20 out of the sampled paint cans offered information about lead content, most of these in Uruguay where all the paints analyzed had very low lead content.

Preliminary analysis from the six Asian countries where IPEN conducted studies mirrored these findings, with one important exception – companies with the largest market share in each of the Asian countries, in general, have responded to national campaigns and to growing public awareness and concern in their countries and have reduced lead levels to below 90 ppm. Though the majority of paints included in the studies still contain high lead levels, they are largely being produced by smaller and medium-sized paint companies.

In both the UNEP and Asian studies, the paint purchases and paint analysis by certified laboratories were coordinated and organized by IPEN and its participating organizations. IPEN and its participating organizations also collaborated with UNEP in the preparation of the report and the formulation of its national findings and recommendations.

IPEN released Asian data as a part of its worldwide activities during [International Lead Poisoning Prevention Week of Action](#), Oct 20 -26, 2013 co-led by UNEP and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#). In addition to the Asia data, IPEN participating organizations also released new reports on lead in paint in Russia and Paraguay and conducted lead awareness activities in a total of more than 20 countries.

Lead in household paints has been regulated in most highly industrial countries for more than 40 years. The United States and Canada recently established a regulatory limit of 90 parts per million (ppm) lead in response to growing concerns that even low-level lead exposures are harmful to children. Some other countries have established regulatory limits of lead in paint at 600 ppm lead.

Lead in paint is a problem because painted surfaces deteriorate with time and when disturbed. If there is lead in the paint, the lead 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

When children are exposed to lead, this tends to decrease their performance in school and their lifelong productivity as part of the national labor force. A recent study investigated the economic impact of childhood lead exposure on national economies and estimated a total cumulative loss of \$977 billion international dollars per year for all low and middle income countries.² The estimated economic loss in Africa is \$134.7 or 4.03% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

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IPEN. IPEN is a leading global organization of 700 non-governmental organizations from 116 countries working to protect human health and the environment from harms caused by toxic chemical exposure.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). UNEP's mission is to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. Along with the World Health Organization,

¹ *Childhood Lead Poisoning*, World Health Organization, 2010, Pages 31-2; <http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/leadguidance.pdf> and *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 See also: UNEP Report: *Lead in Enamel Decorative Paints; National Paint Testing Results: A Nine Country Study*, Section 3. *Lead Exposure and its Health Effects*.

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/>.

UNEP manages the Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead in Paint (GAELP). GAELP's broad objective is to phase out the manufacture and sale of paints containing lead and eventually to eliminate the risks from such paint.

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