

U.S. and EU stall progress on toxic sites at mercury treaty negotiations

(Bangkok) The U.S. has led a push at the mercury treaty negotiations in Bangkok to further delay any global action on mercury contaminated sites. The sixth negotiating meeting of the Minamata Convention on Mercury has failed to live up to its title, which references the world's most infamous mercury contaminated site in Minamata, Japan. The objective of the Convention is to protect human health and the environment from anthropogenic emissions and releases of mercury and mercury compounds.

Article 12 of the Convention urges signatories to endeavor to cooperate in developing strategies and implementing activities for identifying, assessing, prioritizing, managing and, as appropriate, remediating contaminated sites and assessing health risks.

IPEN Mercury Policy Advisor Lee Bell stated, "The U.S. and EU effectively argued to take *no further action* for the foreseeable future to develop global guidance on mercury contaminated sites, and they were not challenged. This leaves a gaping hole in advice to signatories about how they should identify, manage and clean up toxic mercury sites. The endless delay on this issue translates into an enormous increase in the threat to many across the globe as contaminated sites proliferate from industrial contamination, poor waste disposal and small scale gold mining. IPEN called for an expert group to rapidly develop guidance and will redouble its efforts to convince Convention signatories to act on this critical issue."

Mercury contaminated sites are part of a global problem due to the ability of mercury to travel around the world and deposit far from its source. These contaminated sites leak mercury into soil and waterways and release mercury as an airborne vapor. Mercury pollution of the oceans contaminates fish stocks and has a direct impact on the health of people who eat fish.

Mercury used in small scale gold mining contaminates the environment and is an acute poisoning threat to millions of miners and impoverished communities in developing countries. There is growing evidence of Minamata disease-like symptoms among miners using mercury to extract gold. Mercury causes devastating damage to the human nervous system resulting in impacts on cognitive thinking, memory, attention, language, motor and visual spatial skills.

"The mercury affects the miners and pollutes their environment. It contaminates the food chain and impacts adversely on their families and communities. Mercury also contaminates the ponds, rivers and rice fields and needs urgent intervention from the authorities to prevent further long term damage," said Yuyun Ismawati from BaliFokus/IPEN lead for ASGM. "Action on this growing health crisis has been sidelined in favor of debate over the composition of reporting forms and financial resources."

Mr. Bell added, "One of the few positive outcomes from the negotiations was a decision to focus on investigating supply and trade of mercury. This trade is notoriously difficult to track and includes a flourishing black market and growing links to organized crime."

IPEN is an international NGO comprised of 700 organizations in 116 countries that work for a toxics-free future. IPEN has been actively involved in the mercury treaty negotiation process leading to the signing of the treaty in October 2013. To date, 128 countries have signed the treaty and 8 countries have ratified.