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Debate over export of toxic flame retardant chemicals erupts at UN meeting

Africa pushes developed countries to stop the export of toxic flame retardant wastes that can cause nervous system damage in infants and toddlers

New IPEN study highlights the presence of toxic flame retardants in carpet pads commonly sold to consumers in the USA and other countries

The 53 countries of the African group, led by Kenya, pushed developed countries to ensure that wastes containing toxic flame retardants are not exported to Africa. The chemicals, known as polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDE) are contained in old electronic products and in foam carpet padding, mattresses, and furniture. These chemicals have been demonstrated to pose significant health hazards for infants and toddlers. A recent IPEN study highlights their presence in multi-colored foam carpet pads commonly used in developed countries, including the United States.

Kenya proposed the ban last week at the 5th Conference of Parties of the Stockholm Convention after an expert committee recommended ending the practice of recycling plastics and foam containing flame retardants and stopping their export. The debate lasted long into the night when delegates finally agreed only to encourage countries not to export wastes containing flame retardants listed in the Stockholm Convention rather than requiring them to stop export.

“Delegates agreed to continue allowing these toxic flame retardant wastes to be exported from developed countries to the developing world, even though the expert committee said to stop it,” said Mariann Lloyd-Smith, IPEN co-chair. “We expect developed countries to be responsible for their own wastes, instead of insisting on their right to dump them in Africa and elsewhere.”

The debate over PBDE exports came the same week that IPEN revealed in a first-ever study that a type of foam carpet pad commonly sold in the USA and other developed countries contains levels of PBDEs that raise concerns about exposures that can harm human health. The substances, PentaBDE and OctaBDE, resemble PCBs in structure and toxic effects and were recently listed by the Stockholm Convention for global elimination in more than 170 countries.

Either one or both chemicals were found in 23 of 26 (88%) samples of foam padding from Canada, Hungary, and USA. Half the samples contained components of PentaBDE at levels that exceeded the indicative hazardous waste limit under European Union regulation. For OctaBDE components, 46% of the samples exceeded the limit.

Many countries strongly supported the African proposal to end exports of PBDE wastes including Argentina (on behalf of all Latin American and Caribbean countries), Bangladesh, Fiji, Gabon, Ghana, India, Jordan (on behalf of all Arabic countries) Mexico, Norway, and Sri Lanka. During the plenary discussion, Australia, Canada, EU, Japan, Switzerland and the USA rejected mandatory actions to stop the exports, insisting that the expert committee recommendations should be optional.

The same group of developed countries pushed for and secured an exemption two years ago which permits recycling of materials containing PBDEs. In the United States PCBs are banned, and there is a voluntary agreement with manufacturers to stop producing PentaBDE and OctaBDE. However, the loophole that permits recycling of materials containing these toxic substances into new consumer products remains in force along with the exemption permitting their export.

PentaBDE and OctaBDE are released from foams and plastics into house dust and pose significant hazards for infants and toddlers, and children under four who crawl around on carpets already have the highest levels of PBDEs in the general population. People who recycle foam and lay carpet have been found to have 10 times the amount of these chemicals in their body as the general public. According to the Convention expert committee, PentaBDE is linked to reproductive toxicity, neurodevelopmental toxicity and negative effects on thyroid hormones. OctaBDE hazards include delayed neurotoxicity and immunotoxicity.

“Allowing the recycling toxic chemicals such as PentaBDE and OctaBDE into our consumer products is dangerous and threatens the integrity of the Stockholm Convention,” said Dr. Olga Speranskaya, IPEN co-chair. “Our living rooms should not be a hazardous waste dump.”

The study is available here: <http://ipen.org/cop5/brominated-flame-retardants/>

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IPEN, www.ipen.org, is a global network of more than 700 health and environmental organizations working in 109 countries. IPEN supports local, national, regional and international efforts to protect human health and the environment from harms caused by exposure to all toxic chemicals.