

IPEN - Indigenous Environmental Network
California Indian Environmental Alliance – International Indian Treaty Council

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UN delegates tackle the true cost of gold

High gold prices vs. child labor and toxic contaminated sites

(Nairobi, Kenya) Delegates from more than 120 countries are being reminded of the true cost of gold mining on the first day of a meeting to negotiate a global mercury treaty. Discussions focused on small-scale mining since it is the largest deliberate use of mercury.

While delegates debated mercury control and economic benefits of the activity, civil society representatives and Indigenous Peoples distributed postcards with chocolate gold coins asking, “*What is the true price of gold?*” The card cited data from the International Labour Organisation stating that in Africa, children under the age of 18 may constitute up to 30%-50% of the entire small-scale gold mining workforce.

“Gold mining in poor communities is sweet for gold traders but bitter for children,” said Yuyun Ismawati, Indonesia Toxics Free Network and IPEN. “The price of gold will never equal the cost of brain damage, contaminated communities, and the impacts of child labor.”

ILO recently released a report which identified about 115 million of children working in hazardous works and mining considered as one of the hazardous workplaces for children. More than half of the working children were clinically diagnosed with severe mercury intoxication.¹

Mercury can permanently damage the brain and kidneys and has been shown to affect a developing fetus, even months after the mother’s exposure. The large use of mercury in small scale gold mining coupled with the involvement of women and children raise serious health concerns.

“The treaty needs a public health strategy to address the harms in mining communities, particularly for women and children,” said Manny Calonzo, IPEN co-chair. “This includes cleaning up the toxic mess that mining leaves behind.”

Small-scale gold mining also raises concerns about violations of other UN treaties concerning human rights, including the Convention on Rights of the Child which enshrines the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health and recognizes the right to be protected from economic exploitation and from work that is likely to be hazardous.²

¹ International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), ILO. (2011). Children in hazardous work What we know, What we need to do.

² <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

“Delegates must find the heart to ensure the mercury treaty protects children from economic slavery and ensures their right to a healthy future,” said Tom BK Goldtooth, a member of the Global Indigenous Peoples Caucus and director of the Indigenous Environmental Network. Indigenous Peoples at the Nairobi meeting are lifting the need for strong treaty language recognizing the human rights dimensions of anthropogenic mercury contamination.

The meeting this week marks the third intergovernmental negotiating meeting in a series of five meetings which will culminate in a diplomatic conference in 2013 to sign the treaty. The negotiation is being coordinated by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).³ For more information about mercury, please see: http://www.ipen.org/ipenweb/documents/book/ipen%20mercury%20booklet_s.pdf

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IPEN is a global network of more than 700 health and environmental organizations working in 109 countries for a toxics free future. <http://ipen.org/hgfree/home/>

Indigenous Environmental Network is an international network of Indigenous Peoples that work for environmental and economic justice. <http://www.ienearth.org/>

California Indian Environmental Alliance is an Indigenous advocacy group addressing mining contaminants and legacy sites. <http://www.cieaweb.org/>

International Indian Treaty Council is an international network of Indigenous Peoples working for the rights and recognition of Indigenous Peoples. <http://www.treatycouncil.org/>

³ <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Mercury/tabid/434/Default.aspx>