



**Mercury
Policy Project**



U.S. blocks global mercury regulations while EU, Brazil, Japan, Philippines, Nordic and African countries and NGOs express support

(Nairobi, - 12 February 2007) Anti-mercury advocates conditionally welcomed the decision of the 24th United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council meeting on 5-9 February as a small step forward. However, overall viewed they viewed it as a missed opportunity largely due to the opposition of a few countries, led by the U.S.

“Most governments recognized the need for global mercury regulations,” said Michael Bender of the Mercury Policy Project. “If the U.S. can’t lead, they should follow, or at least get out of the way.”

“The steps agreed on are inadequate to address the urgency of the global mercury crisis,” said Bender. “They even failed to set voluntary reduction goals or export bans like the EU is now considering to reduce the impacts of mercury around the world.”

The amount of mercury used and released in the world is increasing. Since UNEP’s Mercury report was released in 2002, overall reductions in mercury use worldwide have not taken place.ⁱ Mercury use has gone down in industrialized nations, but developing countries have become increasingly reliant on this toxic metal. Air releases have also increased over the past 15 years.

“Once again, a few countries led by US and India delayed real progress, whereas the EU, the African Region, Japan, Brazil, the Philippines, Norway and Switzerland were ready to make a political decision on a legally binding instrument as the way forward,” said Elena Lymberidi from the European Environmental Bureau. “Instead, we have a process to consider options during the next Governing Council in 2009. We must finally move beyond promising words into real action.”

There were some small positive developments that were adopted:

- Priorities were identified to reduce risks from emissions, demand, and supply of mercury, as well as from contaminated sites.
- There was a call to fill data gaps on supply and demand
- An air emissions report will be developed
- An ad hoc open ended working group will be formed to further discuss priorities and options and report back to the 25th Governing Council.
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“These are baby steps, while giant steps are needed!” said Zuleica Nycz, ACPO, Brazil, “Not having a legally binding instrument means that developing countries will not have the necessary incentive to develop national programmes or policies to protect their people from toxic mercury.”

Mercury is a potent nerve poison and affects the brain and central nervous system. Workers exposed to mercury, eg small-scale gold miners, often suffer from tremors, memory loss and other neurological damage. Those most at risk from methylmercury-contaminated food are babies and small children. The brains of babies in the uterus are the most vulnerable. The greatest risk is to young women, before or during pregnancy, eating fish containing high levels of methylmercury (eg shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and some types of tuna).

The UNEP GC decided in 2003 that both immediate and long term action was needed to “address the significant adverse impacts of mercury.” (GMA, key findings, #35, see: <http://www.chem.unep.ch/Mercury/Report/Key-findings.htm>).

For more information:

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Footnotes:-

(1) <http://www.chem.unep.ch/mercury/Trade-information.htm>

