



New UN-backed voluntary programme seeks to curb toxic mercury pollution

14 February 2007 – Governments have two years to see whether a voluntary programme to reduce health and environmental threats from toxic mercury is working under a new United Nations-backed initiative or if a legally-binding treaty is needed to curb the heavy metal linked with a wide range of medical problems, including neurological damage to babies.

The programme, agreed to by 140 governments at the close of a gathering of environment ministers at the UN Environment Programmes ([UNEP](#)) Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, last week, calls for developing partnerships between governments, industry and other key groups to curb mercury emissions, ranging from power stations and mines to industrial and consumer products.

After two years, governments will gauge its success and reflect on whether the voluntary initiative has worked or whether negotiations should commence on a new international and legally-binding treaty.

Part of the new programme may mirror a successful UNEP-coordinated partnership to clean up vehicle fuels in developing countries. In four years this voluntary partnership, launched at the [World Summit on Sustainable Development](#) in 2002, has phased out lead, another notorious heavy metal, from petrol pumps across sub-Saharan Africa.

“The mercury decision... underlines a new determination by environment ministers to rise to the challenges of our time,” UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner said. “For too long environment ministers have met and spoken but their collective voice has not been loudly and decisively heard in the world. This, I believe has changed at this 24th session of the UNEP Governing Council.”

An estimated 2,000 tons of [mercury](#) are released into the environment each year, mainly from coal-fired power stations, waste incinerators and as a result of artisanal mining of gold and silver. The metal is also used in such products as fluorescent light bulbs, dental fillings and thermometers.

Action is to be taken to improve communication of the risks of mercury to vulnerable groups, including pregnant mothers who may put the foetus at risk if they eat too much mercury-contaminated fish or marine mammals such as seals.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=21565&Cr=mercury&Cr1=>