

Press release

Despite progress, global mercury agreement undermined by uncontrolled production and trade

Groups ask governments to fast track ratification, early implementation of Minamata Treaty

Amman, Jordan, 9 March 2016—Commitments toward stronger global mercury controls are being hampered by illegal, unreported and unregulated mercury production and trade, an international NGO coalition revealed today on the eve of a UN mercury treaty meeting in Jordan.

The Zero Mercury Working Group[1] (ZMWG) said that global efforts to reduce emissions of mercury may be derailed if gaps in mercury production and trade controls are not addressed before the treaty enters into force.

“Trafficking in mercury is not like selling potato chips,” said Michael Bender, ZMWG International Coordinator. “There are well known consequences when mercury gets haphazardly produced, traded and subsequently released into the biosphere.”

Mercury is a potent persistent neurotoxin that bioaccumulates, posing the greatest risks to developing children, coastal populations and millions of small-scale gold miners using mercury around the globe.

The Minamata Convention on Mercury, agreed in 2013, signed by 128 countries and ratified by 23 nations thus far, is a treaty that protects human health and environment from mercury pollution. The treaty bans new mercury mines, places control measures on air emissions, imposes regulations on artisanal and small-scale gold mining, and enforces the phase out of existing mines and products.

The meeting in Jordan this week is the seventh session of the intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC) on mercury. Delegates are meeting to agree on the finer details of the agreement. This is the last meeting before the Convention enters into force, once 50 countries ratify it.

“Countries need to stay true to the spirit and intent of this historic agreement,” said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, ZMWG International Coordinator. “In order to stop the flow we need to first know where mercury supply comes from and where it goes.”

Significant gaps in information on mercury production and trade flows prevent a clear understanding of the global supply situation. There is currently no standard information or listing on mercury production, supply and trade. Some mercury producing countries do not report production levels and many countries have no accurate listing of their mercury stocks due to the proliferation of illegal or smuggled supplies.

“It is worrying that new and soon to be illegal primary mercury minesⁱ are now popping up in Indonesia and Mexico, and that East Asia is emerging as a major mercury trading hub,” said Richard Gutierrez, Director, Ban Toxics! – Philippines. “All this feeds substantial mercury demand in small-scale gold mining in the greater Asian region, Latin America and potentially across the world. These trends do not bode well for the future of the treaty.”

The ZMWG believes that to effectively control and manage mercury trade, countries need to start identifying and quantifying their mercury production sources. Governments need to be transparent about their production volumes and stockpiles and about who is exporting and how much to which countries.

“Preventing opportunistic mercury production and trade through an efficient reporting and monitoring structure will help to prevent it from continuing. This should be a top priority when governments gather tomorrow,” said Rico Euripidou of groundWork South Africa. “Data reporting should become an integral part of the treaty. Otherwise the treaty may end up being just another paper tiger.”

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Notes to editors:

[1] ZMWG is a global coalition of over 95 public interest environmental and health non-governmental organizations from more than 50 countries.

[2] The Minamata Convention on Mercury <http://www.mercuryconvention.org>

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ⁱ Once the treaty enters into force, mercury from primary mining will no longer be allowed used in artisanal and small scale gold mining.