Press Release

“High Level of Mercury in Skin Lightener in Bangladesh and Global Market”

“Global Toxic Trade in Risky, High Mercury and Often Illegal Skin Lighteners Still Widely Available, Particularly on the Internet,” says global mercury NGO coalition.

Dhaka, November 15, 2018: A high percentage of skin lightening creams sold worldwide contain dangerous levels of mercury, according to results presented in a new report by the Zero Mercury Working Group.

In 2017 and 2018, 338 skin-lightening creams from 22 countries were collected and tested for mercury. 34 creams (10% of the samples) had mercury concentrations ranging from 93 - 16,353 parts per million (ppm). These levels significantly exceeded not only many countries’ regulations, but also the provisions in the Minamata Convention disallowing after 2020 the “manufacture, import or export” of cosmetics with a mercury content above 1 ppm.

“Toxic trade in illegal high mercury skin lighteners is a global crisis which is expected to only worsen with skyrocketing global demand,” said Elena Lymberidi- Settimo, European Environmental Bureau Project Manager “Zero Mercury Campaign” and International coordinator Zero Mercury working Group. “To combat this, it's important for governments to quickly enact and/or enforce regulations and effectively warn consumers”, she added.

Environment and Social Development Organization-ESDO Chairperson Syed Marghub Murshed said, "Skin-lightening creams are pushing the youth towards a serious health risk and environmental havoc. He urges the government to take a regulatory and legislative step to protect future generation and the environment".

“Mercury is well known toxic and a serious risk to human health,” said Dr. Shahriar Hossain, Secretary General of ESDO. Dr. Shahriar also emphasized that, “Skin-lightening creams containing mercury can lead to rashes, skin discoloration and blotching. Long-term exposure can have serious health consequences, including damage to the skin, eyes, lungs, kidneys, digestive, immune and nervous systems.”

“While the deeply rooted practice of skin lightening will not change rapidly, mercury exposure via cosmetics poses serious health but also environmental risks,” said Professor Abul Hashem, Senior Advisor of ESDO. “Governments, health practitioners and community leaders should initiate culturally appropriate campaigns about the potential risks for people who use skin-lighteners”, he added.

The Zero Mercury testing also revealed that:

- in Bangladesh, 50% of the creams sampled and tested had mercury content exceeding 1 ppm.
- in the Dominican Republic, 33% of the samples had mercury above 1 ppm, as compared with Indonesia at 31%.
✓ in Mauritius, one out of 15 creams was found to contain more than 1 ppm (7%).
✓ in the Philippines, 19% of the samples exceeded 1 ppm mercury content, while the Thai samples reached 63%; and
✓ in Trinidad and Tobago, 20% of the samples tested also exceeded the Minamata limits.

Despite being identified on many government detention lists, recent testing indicates the wide prevalence of high mercury and illegal products indiscriminately sold on the world wide web. In parallel with other purchases from local shops and markets, the groups also purchased skin lighteners from eBay and Amazon websites. The brands purchased included many previously identified as high mercury by New York City, the state of Minnesota, the European Union, Singapore, UAE, the Philippines and many other national governments. 19 products had illegal mercury levels, often more than 10,000 times higher than the legal threshold of 1 ppm.

“Internet sellers Amazon and eBay must stop breaking the law by contributing to the toxic trade in illegal cosmetics,” said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. “They have the responsibility and resources to prevent exposing their customers to toxic products.”

In response, ESDO and over 50 civil society groups from more than 20 countries sent letters today to Amazon and eBay, calling on them to stop marketing illegal mercury-based skin lightening creams. In their letters, the groups are calling on Amazon and eBay to among others ensure the products they sell comply with government regulations, develop and monitor lists of toxic skin lighteners identified, and require prior sale approval for those to be sold. As countries strive to comply with the 1 ppm provision pertaining to cosmetics in the Minamata Convention on Mercury, a range of measures are available to countries to reduce exposure to mercury from skin lighteners.

Globally, mercury-based products are a big business. Skin-lightening creams and soaps, especially in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, had sales of $17.9 billion in 2017, and are projected to leap to $31.2 billion by 2024, according to Global Industry Analysts.

Mercury is often added to skin lightening products -- also known as “bleaching creams,” “whiteners,” “skin brighteners,” and “fading creams” -- because inorganic mercury salts (e.g. 1-10% ammoniated mercury) inhibit the formation of melanin in the skin, resulting in a lighter skin tone.

For more information:

www.zeromercury.org

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