“Stop this toxic trade!”: NGOs demand tough mercury limits

(Brussels, Madison WI, Washington DC, - 31 January 2007) Anti-mercury advocates are urging governments around the world to ban mercury exports and reduce global mercury pollution at the forthcoming 24th United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council meeting in Nairobi on 5-9 February. “Governments must now agree tough and binding rules to reduce mercury contamination” said Elena Lymberidi from the Zero Mercury coalition. “Mercury poisons the brain and threatens all of us and future generations, at both high and low levels. So this Governing Council Decision must have teeth to ensure global action.”

In the five years since UNEP’s Global Mercury Assessment report, there has been no significant reduction in mercury use worldwide, according to UNEP’s new mercury trade report.[i] Trade has stabilised at about 3,500 tonnes per year for the past decade. As mercury use has gone down in industrialised nations, developing countries have become increasingly reliant on this toxic metal. Air pollution experts also report that global mercury releases into the atmosphere have increased over the past 15 years (see charts below[ii]).

“UNEP’s Governing Council first identified mercury as a serious global threat over six years ago,” said Michael Bender of the Mercury Policy Project. “It has since supported extensive research that all leads to one conclusion: serious, concerted global action must be taken immediately to reduce the level of mercury in the environment and protect fish as a viable world protein source.”

Anti-mercury campaigners believe that the fundamental cause of failure over the past two years has been that governments have only supported voluntary ‘partnership’ programmes, instead of backing a meaningful, legally-binding agreement, with the necessary financial assistance and explicit reduction goals. Advocates insist that global, binding agreements are the only way to curtail mercury’s worldwide reach.

“Governments must demonstrate their commitment to immediate and meaningful action, by adopting legally-binding multilateral agreements,” said Rico Euripidou, from groundWork South Africa. “The scope and direction of current measures are too limited and on their own they are insufficient to reduce the risks resulting from mercury exposure.”

The NGOs recommend curtailing mercury’s global reach by:-

1. Immediately working towards a globally-binding instrument on mercury
2. Using the UNEP trade reports’ findings
3. Reducing global mercury demand by setting a target to reduce it by 70% by 2017, ending mercury use in electronics, button cell batteries, thermometers, and other non-electronic measuring equipment, phasing out the mercury-cell chlor-alkali process, and setting a sector-specific demand reduction goal to halve artisanal and small-scale gold mining by 2017, eliminating mercury use in whole ore processing, and other practicable measures
4. Instructing UNEP to develop a global air emissions report for the next GC, to form the basis for setting goals to reduce major sources of airborne mercury emissions
5. Reducing mercury supply by halting primary mining, except where mercury is a by-product from other ore processing, and restricting developed nation mercury exports and managing mercury from closing mercury cell chlor-alkali facilities
6. Developed nations providing new and additional funding to support these activities in developing nations.

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) or miners being exposed during gold mining.

Notes to editors:-

In 2002, UNEP's own Global Mercury Assessment concluded that: "Despite data gaps, sufficient understanding has been developed of mercury (including knowledge of its fate and transport, health and environmental impacts, and the role of human activity), based on extensive research over half a century, that international actions to address the global mercury problem should not be delayed." (GMA, key findings, #35, see: http://www.chem.unep.ch/Mercury/Report/Key-findings.htm).

For more information please see:

- the special report in preparation of the 24 UNEP GC:
  "NGO Strategy for Addressing the "Global Mercury Crisis" at the February 2007 UNEP Governing Council Meeting
  http://www.zeromercury.org/UNEP_developments/070130NGOs_addressing_Global_Mercury_Crisis_for_2007_UNEP_GC.pdf
- The NGOs submission to UNEP "NGOs Proposal for a Global Mercury Strategy at the 2007 UNEP Governing Council Meeting" 24 January 2007,
  http://www.zeromercury.org/UNEP_developments/NGO%20UNEP%20GC%20Proposal%20-%202007REV.pdf
- the Report of the "Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury" campaign on health implications of mercury contamination, http://www.env-health.org/r/145

Figure 1

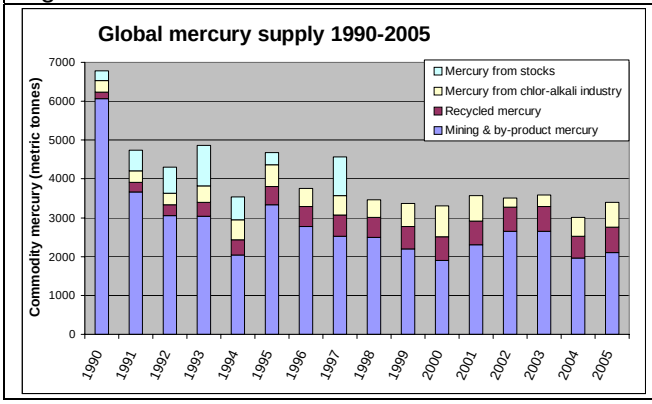
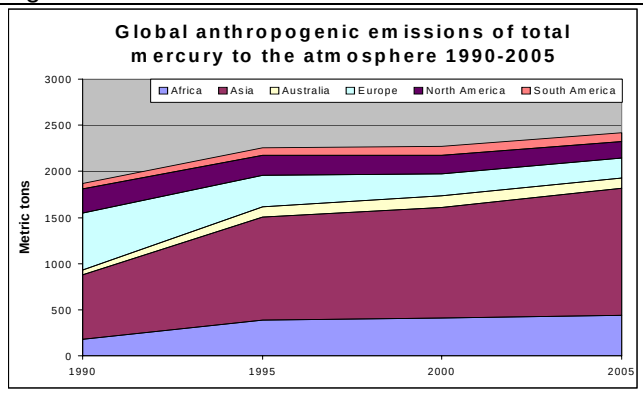


Figure 2



Footnotes:-

[i] Both available in a single document at http://www.chem.unep.ch/mercury/Trade-information.htm

[ii] Figure 1 is derived from the recently published UNEP mercury trade report prepared for the 5-9 February 2007 Governing Council meeting, and indicates global mercury use has changed little since 1994 as the developed world exports its excess mercury and outdated technologies to the developing world. Figure 2 is based on the work of Jozef Pacyna and his colleagues, and illustrates that atmospheric mercury releases have actually increased, from sources such as coal combustion, smelting of metal ores (particularly zinc and copper), chlor-alkali plants, and waste handling/disposal of products containing mercury.

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