

GOVERNMENTS MISS CHANCE TO DEVELOP AN INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY TO ADDRESS GLOBAL MERCURY CRISIS

[Nairobi, 25 February 2005]

At the UNEP Governing Council meeting today, Environmental Ministers from around the world agreed upon several important steps to reduce global mercury pollution. They recommended actions that individual countries could take to reduce mercury use, trade and release and more research on supply, demand and trade. Yet non-governmental organizations and indigenous peoples expressed concerns that the UNEP mercury agreement fell short of what was needed.

"Basically, the USA hijacked the process despite the overwhelming evidence from the U.N. about the global mercury crisis and the need for immediate and long-term international action." stated Michael Bender of Ban Mercury Working Group, an international NGO coalition. "All the USA proposed were voluntary partnerships to address mercury, which based on past experience in other areas do not produce meaningful results."

Developing countries expressed concern about likely effectiveness of such partnerships. "Although there was a strong recognition by developing countries at the meeting of the seriousness of the issue of mercury and the disproportionate impacts it has on them, the international community still is not addressing the crisis in a meaningful and accountable manner." stated Ravi Agarwal, Director of Toxics Link, an environmental NGO in India.

The European Union, Norway, and Switzerland had recommended complementary immediate concrete actions and a treaty proposal following adoption of a mercury strategy by the European Commission.

"The EU played a strong role in highlighting the need for a legally binding instrument and other important policy measures. We are disappointed that other countries did not allow the proposal to move forward," said Elena Lymberidi, of the European Environmental Bureau.

"Strong coordinated international action, in combination with a legally binding measures, are essential to address mercury", stated Kevin Brigden of Greenpeace. "We hope that governments will act upon this urgent need in the future."

The NGO community considered the following accomplishments to be the most important:

- A recognition of the value of both curbing primary mercury mining and the introduction into commerce of excess mercury supplies;
- A decision to undertake an analysis of the global mercury trade, supply and demand in order to better understand the extent and patterns of use;
- A request that governments consider banning or restricting the use of mercury in products like batteries and processes such as chlor-alkali facilities;
- A request that governments consider controlling mercury emissions using best available techniques;
- A request that industrialized countries provide developing countries with access to financial resources in order to reduce mercury pollution; and
- A decision to assess at the 24th Governing Council session in two

years the need for further action on mercury, including the possibility of a legally binding instrument.

"Unfortunately, the agreements are weak. They do not ensure that mercury will stop being dumped on developing nations as happened when mercury waste was imported into South Africa by Thor Chemicals, resulting in contamination and numerous deaths," said Llewellyn Leonard of groundWork.

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NOTE FOR THE EDITORS

Environmental NGOS include:

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), www.nrdc.org, is a private, U.S. not-for-profit environmental organization that uses science, law, and the support of more 500,000 members nationwide to protect the planet's wildlife and wild places, and to ensure a safe and healthy environment for all living things.,

The European Environmental Bureau, (EEB), www.eeb.org, is a federation of more than 140 environmental citizens' organisations based in all EU Member States and most Accession Countries, as well as in a few neighbouring countries. These organisations range from local and national, to European and international. The aim of the EEB is to protect and improve the environment of Europe and to enable the citizens of Europe to play their part in achieving that goal.

The Ban Mercury Working Group, www.ban.org/Ban-Hg-Wg/, is an international coalition of 27 public interest non-governmental organisations from around the world formed initially in 2002 by 2 US based NGOs, the Basel Action Network (www.ban.org) and the Mercury Policy Project (www.Mercurypolicy.org). working to end pollution from the toxic metal -- Mercury.

Greenpeace, www.greenpeace.org

And with the support of NGOs from India (Toxics Link), China (Global Village of Beijing), Brazil (Association for Combats against the POPS), South Africa (groundWork-Friends of the Earth South Africa) and traditional indigenous nations in the U.S. and Alaska (International Indian Treaty Council)

See environmental NGO comments to UNEP at:

http://www.mercurypolicy.org/new/documents/UNEP_Comments_070104.pdf