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## **Many Issues Impacting Public's Health Still to be Resolved in Mercury Treaty Talks**

Not yet ready to be called the *Minamata Convention*

(Chiba, Japan) Delegates from more than 120 countries discussed actions to address sources of mercury pollution as they worked this week to negotiate a binding global mercury treaty. However, many issues must still be resolved before a comprehensive agreement protecting public health and truly honoring the proposal to name the treaty, the *Minamata Convention*, is assured.

“Timelines for the phase-out of mercury- using manufacturing processes, clean-up of contaminated sites, and how to address the major sources of mercury emissions, such as coal combustion and small scale gold mining, all remain unresolved at this point,” said Olga Speranskaya, IPEN co-chair. “We hope the delegates make significant progress on these issues at the third negotiating session which will take place in Africa, in approximately eight months.”

Big developing countries rejected proposals to address coal combustion arguing that a goal to reduce them was not needed. A few hours of discussing small scale gold mining led to larger questions about how the treaty would address both mercury and the larger livelihood and poverty issues.

The Minamata tragedy loomed over the discussions as representatives from 13 victims' groups insisted that the unresolved disaster must be authentically addressed before the treaty could take the Minamata name in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Minamata victim Shinobu Sakamoto presented a statement from 13 Minamata victims and supporter groups directly to the Vice Minister of the Japanese Ministry of Environment. More than 72 public interest civil society organizations from 42 countries supported the Minamata groups' demands in the *Honoring Minamata* statement.<sup>2</sup> Many participants pinned orange and blue ribbons to their clothing as reminders of the tragedy.

“This week the global community made a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the victims of Minamata through INC2 mercury discussions. Symbolic gestures can only go so far. Real, immediate, and effective global actions that stop mercury pollution are the only actions that bring

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<sup>1</sup> Available in English and Japanese by request

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ipen.org/hgfree/inc2.html>

honor and justice to Minamata and its memory,” said Takeshi Yasuma, of Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution (CACP) (Japan).

Several negotiation topics related directly to the Minamata tragedy, which was caused by a manufacturing process that produced a contaminated site in the Minamata Bay and contaminated fish. The specific process that caused the disaster (mercury-catalyzed acetaldehyde production) was left out of the list of processes that the treaty should address. More importantly, delegates did not agree to establish any global timeline for the phase-out of any mercury-using manufacturing processes. Delegates also disagreed on measures to address contaminated sites, with many donor countries proposing only voluntary action to identify and clean-up sites which would likely disqualify the activity from the treaty financial mechanism.

Many governments repeatedly used the word “flexibility” during the week-long negotiating meeting to describe their approach to actually taking action on mercury. NGOs hope that “flexibility” is not simply an excuse for half-hearted measures that fail to protect human health and the environment from the serious harms of mercury.

“The mercury treaty negotiation needs government champions,” said Mariann Lloyd-Smith, IPEN co-chair. “We are looking for an ambitious approach to mercury pollution and a strong treaty whose actions will once again make fish safe to eat.”

Looking forward, public interest NGOs urge delegates to effectively address all mercury emissions, not just emissions to air, and to take authentic actions to resolve the ongoing Minamata tragedy. NGOs remained committed to a comprehensive treaty that addresses all human sources of mercury so that fish are once again safe to eat.

The meeting this week marked the second intergovernmental negotiating meeting in a series of five meetings which will culminate in a diplomatic conference in 2013 to sign the treaty. The negotiation is being coordinated by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).<sup>3</sup> The next negotiating meeting will be held in Africa at the end of October 2011. For more information about mercury, please see:

[http://www.ipen.org/ipenweb/documents/book/ipen%20mercury%20booklet\\_s.pdf](http://www.ipen.org/ipenweb/documents/book/ipen%20mercury%20booklet_s.pdf)

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Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution (CACP), a Tokyo based NGO, was established in 1997 and since then it has been working on policies and issues related to chemicals pollution in humans and environment. For more information see: <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/kagaku/pico/index.html>

IPEN, [www.ipen.org](http://www.ipen.org), is a global network of more than 700 health and environmental organizations working in 109 countries. The Network was originally founded to promote the negotiation of a global treaty to protect human health and the environment from a class of toxic chemicals called Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). Then, following adoption by governments of the Stockholm Convention on POPs, IPEN expanded its mission beyond POPs and now supports local, national, regional and international efforts to protect health and the environment from harms caused by exposure to all toxic chemicals.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/MercuryNot/MercuryNegotiations/tabid/3320/language/en-US/Default.aspx>