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Mercury treaty rises but weak emissions regime undercuts progress

[19 January 2013, Geneva]—After four years of deliberation, a new global regime rises today that will govern toxic mercury worldwide. The new treaty is a mixture of mandatory and voluntary elements intended to control the burgeoning global mercury crisis. While heading in the right direction, the Zero Mercury Working Groupⁱ, expressed concerns about the treaty not reaching far enough nor fast enough to address the spiraling human health risks from mercury exposure.

“Adoption of a global legal agreement on mercury is a major accomplishment,” said Michael T. Bender, co-coordinator of the Zero Mercury Working Group. “Yet the instrument is hampered by weak controls on mercury emissions from major sources like coal-fired power plants.”

For instance, new facilities will not be required to have mercury pollution controls for 5 years after the treaty enters into force, with existing facilities given 10 years before they begin their control efforts.

Yet ZMWG says there are bright spots in the treaty. These include provisions to reduce trade, prohibit the primary mining of mercury, and phase out the toxic element in most products containing mercury, like thermometers, measuring devices and batteries.

“Some of these steps were unthinkable just a couple of years ago. Now, alternatives exist for most all products containing mercury,” said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, of European Environmental Bureau and co-coordinator of ZMWG. “The treaty sends the right market signal and will eventually lead to less exposures worldwide.”

The treaty also addresses artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM), which is both the largest intentional use of mercury globally, and is the largest emission source.

“While national action plans will foster reduced use of mercury in ASGM, the treaty fails to include a provision to require an eventual end to this polluting practice,” said Richard Gutierrez, Ban Toxics! Director from the Philippines. “With the current text, it seems that mercury use in ASGM may go on indefinitely.”

The Zero Mercury Working Group looks forward to treaty implementation, as the real challenge begins for the governments especially in developing and least developing states. The newborn mercury treaty, in spite its flaws, presents a real opportunity to work towards significant reduction of mercury globally.

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ⁱ The Zero Mercury Working Group is an international coalition of over 100 public interest NGOs from more than 50 countries founded by the European Environmental Bureau and Mercury Policy Project, in 2005 to achieve ‘Zero’ emissions, demand and supply of mercury; www.zeromercury.org