

21 January 2013 Last updated at 06:27 ET Nations agree on legally binding mercury rules

By Mark Kinver Environment reporter, BBC News

Rising gold prices has seen an increase in small-scale gold mines, most of which use mercury

More than 140 countries have agreed on a set of legally binding measures to curb mercury pollution, at UN talks.

Delegates in Geneva approved measures to control the use of the highly toxic metal in order to reduce the amount of mercury released into the environment.

Mercury can produce a range of adverse human health effects, including permanent damage to the nervous system.

The UN recently published data that showed mercury emissions were rising in a number of developing nations.

The deal was agreed after all-night talks.

"After complex and often all night sessions here in Geneva, nations have today laid the foundations for a global response to a pollutant whose notoriety has been recognised for well over a century," UN Environment Programme executive director Achim Steiner said on Saturday.

"Everyone in the world stands to benefit... in particular the workers and families of small-scale gold miners, the peoples of the Arctic and this generation of mothers and babies and the generations to come."

The rules, known as the Minamata Convention and named after the [Japanese town that experienced one of the world's worst cases of mercury poisoning](#), will open for nations to sign at a diplomatic conference later this year.

The convention will regulate a range of areas, including:

- the supply of and trade in mercury;
- the use of mercury in products and industrial processes;
- the measures to be taken to reduce emissions from artisanal and small-scale gold mining;
- the measures to be taken to reduce emissions from power plants and metals production facilities.

Ahead of the five-day meeting, Unep published a report warning that developing nations were facing growing health and environmental risks from increased exposure to mercury.

It said a growth in small-scale mining and coal burning were the main reasons for the rise in emissions.

As a result of rapid industrialisation, South-East Asia was the largest regional emitter and accounted for almost half of the element's annual global emissions.

Lasting effects

Mercury - a heavy, silvery white metal - is a liquid at room temperature and can evaporate easily. Within the environment, it is found in cinnabar deposits. It is also found in natural forms in a range of other rocks, including limestone and coal.

Burning coal is another major source of mercury emissions, the report says

Mercury can be released into the environment through a number of industrial processes including mining, metal and cement production, and the burning of fossil fuels.

Once emitted, it persists in the environment for a long time - circulating through air, water, soil and living organisms - and can be dispersed over vast distances.

The World Health Organization (WHO) says: "Mercury is highly toxic to human health, posing a particular threat to the development of the (unborn) child and early in life.

"The inhalation of mercury vapour can produce harmful effects on the nervous, digestive and immune systems, lungs and kidneys, and may be fatal.

"The inorganic salts of mercury are corrosive to the skin, eyes and gastrointestinal tract, and may induce kidney toxicity if ingested."

The Unep assessment said the concentration of mercury in the top 100m of the world's oceans had doubled over the past century, and estimated that 260 tonnes of the toxic metal had made their way from soil into rivers and lakes.

Another characteristic, it added, was that mercury became more concentrated as it moved up the food chain, reaching its highest levels in predator fish that could be consumed by humans.

Campaign group Zero Mercury Working Group co-coordinator Michael Bender called the global deal a "major accomplishment", but added: "Yet the instrument is hampered by weak controls on mercury emissions from major sources like coal-fired power plants."

He said new facilities would not be required to have mercury pollution controls for five years after the treaty came into force, with existing facilities given a decade before they had to begin their control efforts.

The World Coal Association (WCA), a trade body for the industry, said that burning coal account for about 24% of global mercury emissions and the use of "adequate technologies" could reduce emissions of the metal from coal-fired power stations by up to 90%.

WCA chief executive Milton Catelin said: "[The Convention] will ensure that countries are able to address the issue of mercury emissions from their coal-fired power plants via the application of technologies which are most appropriate in a given national context and for a given facility

and without having to restrict the use of coal as an energy fuel or to compromise their economic development goals."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21078176>

<http://ens-newswire.com/2013/01/26/governments-agree-first-global-mercury-control-treaty/>

„Minamata Convention“

140 Nationen stimmen Quecksilber- Reduzierung zu

20.01.2013 17:06 Uhr

Nach vier Jahren des Verhandeln kommt nun der Durchbruch beim weltweiten Kampf gegen giftiges Quecksilber. 140 Staaten haben sich darauf geeinigt die Emissionen des giftigen Schwermetalls von Fieberthermometern über Energiesparlampen bis zu Kohlekraftwerken zu reduzieren.



Ein Kind zeigt seine Hände in einer Goldmine in Burkina Faso. Mit Henna versuchen die Kinder die Haut zu schützen, die durch das Arbeiten mit Quecksilber stark in Mitleidenschaft gezogen werden.

Genf. Nach vierjährigen Verhandlungen zur Reduktion von giftigem Quecksilber haben rund 140 Staaten in der Nacht zum Samstag den Durchbruch zu einer völkerrechtlich verbindlichen Konvention erzielt. Dadurch könnten weltweit Gefahren für die Gesundheit von Millionen von Menschen verringert werden, erklärte Achim Steiner, der Exekutivdirektor des UN-Umweltprogramms (Unep) zum Abschluss des Verhandlungsmarathons in Genf. Die Europäische Union und die Weltgesundheitsorganisation (WHO) begrüßten die Einigung.

„Nach sehr komplexen und oft nächtelangen Sitzungen haben die Staaten heute die Grundlage für ein globales Vorgehen gegen einen Schadstoff gelegt, dessen Gefährlichkeit seit mehr als einem Jahrhundert bekannt ist“, sagte Steiner. Die Konvention wird im Oktober in der japanischen Stadt Minamata zur Unterzeichnung für alle Staaten ausgelegt. Spätestens 15 Jahre nach Inkrafttreten des Vertragswerkes soll die Gewinnung von Quecksilber abgesehen von einigen Ausnahmen weitgehend eingestellt worden sein.

Das Vertragswerk wird auch „Minamata Convention“ genannt, weil die Stadt in den 1950er Jahren weltweit zum Begriff für Gefahren durch Quecksilber wurde: Tausende von Menschen erlitten dort aufgrund von Quecksilbervergiftungen durch Abwässer eines Chemiewerkes schwere und teils tödliche Schäden am zentralen Nervensystem.

Jährlich gelangen 2000 Tonnen Quecksilber in die Umwelt

Die Konvention sieht längerfristig die Reduktion von Emissionen des flüssigen Schwermetalls in Industrieanlagen vor sowie mittelfristig Verbote für zahlreiche Produkte, die Quecksilber enthalten. Dazu gehören bestimmte Arten von Batterien - mit Ausnahme sogenannter Knopfzellen, die in medizinischen Körperimplantaten benötigt werden. Jährlich gelangen derzeit noch etwa 2000 Tonnen Quecksilber in die Umwelt, etwa die Hälfte davon in Gewässer.

Quecksilber soll auch aus Energiesparlampen, elektrischen Schaltkreisen, Kosmetika, Thermometern, Blutdruckmessgeräten verbannt werden. Ausnahmen wurden auch beim Einsatz von Quecksilber zur Haltbarmachung von Impfstoffen sowie „für religiöse oder traditionsgebundene Aktivitäten“ vereinbart.

Forderungen nach einem obligatorischen Abbau der Quecksilber-Emissionen bei der Goldgewinnung in Kleinunternehmen sowie bei der Energieerzeugung durch Kohleverbrennung konnten nur in abgeschwächter Form durchgesetzt werden. Davon sind vor allem Entwicklungsländer betroffen. Dort sind mit dem Anstieg des Goldpreises massenweise kleine Schürfunternehmen entstanden, die Quecksilber einsetzen, um das Edelmetall vom Erz zu trennen.

Große Gesundheitsgefahr und schwache Kontrollen

Die WHO würdigte die Einigung in Genf als wichtigen Fortschritt beim Gesundheitsschutz. EU-Umweltkommissar Janez Potocnik sagte in Brüssel, die Europäische Union habe seit Jahren für ein weltweites Quecksilber-Abkommen gekämpft. In der EU werde Quecksilber bereits kontrolliert. Es stelle eine große Gesundheitsgefahr dar, wenn es in die Nahrungskette gelange. In weiten Teilen der Welt fehlten solche Kontrollen aber bislang.

Nichtstaatliche Organisationen, die sich für ein umfassendes Quecksilberverbot einsetzen, übten Kritik an dem Konventionstext. Dass es überhaupt zu einem verbindlichen Vertrag kommt, sei zwar zu begrüßen, erklärte Michael Bender von der Dachorganisation Zero Mercury Working Group. „Doch die Wirksamkeit ist eingeschränkt, weil die Kontrollen der Quecksilberemissionen aus Hauptquellen wie Kohlekraftwerken zu schwach sind.“

Die rund 140 beteiligten Staatenvertreter - darunter auch Deutschlands - einigten sich auf Kontrollmaßnahmen für größere industrielle Anlagen von Kohlekraftwerken über Hüttenwerke für Zink- und Gold bis zu großen Zementfabriken. Die Kritiker bemängeln aber, dass viele dieser Maßnahmen bei älteren Anlagen erst innerhalb von zehn Jahren umgesetzt werden müssten und bei neuen erst in fünf Jahren vorgeschrieben seien.

<http://www.haz.de/Nachrichten/Wissen/Uebersicht/140-Nationen-stimmen-Quecksilber-Reduzierung-zu>

Global mercury emissions treaty agreed

Minamata Convention treaty placing legally-binding limits on mercury emissions has been signed by more than 140 countries

More than 140 countries have agreed legal limits on mercury emissions after talks at a United Nations-backed convention in Geneva on Saturday (January 19).

Limits have been agreed on the supply of and trade in mercury; its use in products (such as thermometers, measuring devices and batteries) and industrial processes; and the level of emissions from gold mining, power plants and metal production facilities.

After four years of negotiation, the Minamata Convention treaty will be officially signed at a ceremony in October in the Japanese town it is named after, which was hit by severe mercury pollution more than 50 years ago.

The agreement comes after a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) [report](#), 'Mercury: Time to act', found that mercury emissions from developing countries were on the increase due to mining and coal burning.

Emissions from gold mining (mercury is used to separate gold from the rock) and coal-fired power stations represent the biggest source of mercury pollution worldwide, according to UNEP. However, limits have been placed on mercury emissions from these large industrial facilities as well as from waste incinerators and cement clinkers.

Signatories of the Treaty will also be required to reduce and if possible eliminate the use of mercury by small-scale gold miners, while commitments to public awareness campaigns and promotion of mercury free alternatives are also part of the Treaty.

Benefits

European Commissioner for the environment, Janez Potočnik, said: "We have reached a robust, balanced and dynamic environmental agreement. Whilst the EU has an overarching strategy for controlling mercury at all stages of the mercury life-cycle, such controls are unfortunately lacking in many parts of the world. This new Treaty will bring benefits to all populations around the world, including the citizens of the EU given the long distances that mercury can travel in the air. Pregnant women, infants and children are at particular risk from mercury in the food-chain and this Treaty will bring about significant decreases to their exposure to this toxic substance."

He continued: "It would be unrealistic to expect more than one hundred countries around the world, with economies and living conditions significantly different to those of European citizens, to simply live up to our environmental standards here and now. But the new Treaty is a forceful driver towards a comprehensive mercury phase-out, and we are proud to see that many EU concepts and ideas have made its way into the text. The EU has fought for a global Mercury Treaty for almost seven years – and now we are there."

Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, of NGO the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and co-coordinator of its Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) also welcomed the Treaty: "Some of these steps were unthinkable just a couple of years ago. Now, alternatives exist for most all products containing mercury. The treaty sends the right market signal and will eventually lead to less exposures worldwide."

Concerns

However, there are concerns that the treaty does not go far enough in reducing mercury emissions, as new facilities will have five years to meet the new limits, while existing facilities will have as long as 10 years.

Michael T. Bender, who also co-ordinates the ZMWG, said: "Adoption of a global legal agreement on mercury is a major accomplishment. Yet the instrument is hampered by weak controls on mercury emissions from major sources like coal-fired power plants."

According to World Health Organization (WHO) guidance: "Mercury is highly toxic to human health, posing a particular threat to the development of the (unborn) child and early in life. The inhalation of mercury vapour can produce harmful effects on the nervous, digestive and immune systems, lungs and kidneys, and may be fatal."

More information about the Mercury Treaty is available on the UNEP [website](#).

An international conference regarding the pollutant, 'Mercury 2013', is due to take place in Edinburgh at the end of July ([see airqualitynews.com story](#)).

<http://www.airqualitynews.com/2013/01/22/global-mercury-emissions-treaty-agreed/>

EU hails global deal on cutting mercury emissions



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Published 21 January 2013

Tags

[environment](#), [Janez Potocnik](#), [mercury](#), [Pollution](#), [U.N.](#)

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The European Commission has hailed a UN agreement that will establish the first global treaty to cut mercury pollution. Specific household items will be blacklisted and new controls on power plants and small-scale mines will be introduced, the United Nations said on Saturday (19 January).

The agreement, reached among more than 140 countries, is legally binding and aims to phase out many products that use the toxic liquid metal such as batteries, thermometers and some fluorescent lamps. This will happen through the banning of global import and exports by 2020.

The treaty will require countries with coal-fired power plants such as India and China to install filters on new plants. They also have to commit to reducing emissions from existing operations to prevent mercury from coal reaching the atmosphere.

"We have reached a robust, balanced and dynamic environmental agreement," said Janez Potočnik, the EU Commissioner for the Environment.

"Whilst the EU has an overarching strategy for controlling mercury at all stages of the mercury life-cycle, such controls are unfortunately lacking in many parts of the world. This new Treaty will bring benefits to all populations around the world, including the citizens of the EU given the long distances that mercury can travel in the air," Potočnik said.

The environment commissioner added that pregnant women, infants and children are at particular risk from exposure to mercury in the food chain and the new treaty will significantly decrease their exposure to the toxic substance.

The Commission had previously stressed that pregnant women or those who are breastfeeding "should not eat more than one portion per week of large predatory fish, such as swordfish, shark, marlin and pike". Moreover, parents should be aware that young children "should not eat tuna more than twice per week", it said.

>> **Read: [Green groups call for mercury labelling of fish](#)**

The agreement includes measures to reduce mercury use in small-scale gold mining, however, an all-out ban deal was not reached. Gold prices near \$1,700 a tonne (€1,275/t) have spurred the use of mercury as a catalyst to separate gold from its ore.

Emissions of mercury from artisanal and small-scale gold mines, which are usually unofficial and often illegal, more than doubled to 727 tonnes in 2010 from 2005 levels, overtaking coal-fired power plants as the main source of pollution from the metal.

Financing an obstacle

The treaty requires governments to draw up national rules to comply and could take between three to five years to take effect.

As mercury, also known as quicksilver, is released to the air or washed into rivers and oceans, it spreads worldwide, and builds up in humans mostly through consumption of fish.

Officials said the financing required to bring in cleaner technology for industry and help developing countries come up with local solutions was one of the major sticking points of the U.N. negotiations.

Japan, Norway and Switzerland have made initial pledges totalling \$3 million (€2.26mln) in financing and an interim financial arrangement will be discussed in April by the Global Environment Facility.

Many nations have already tightened laws; the United States barred exports of mercury from January 1, 2013. The EU was the main global exporter until 2008, but has since 2011 barred exports of the liquid metal.

Positions:

Fernando Lugris, chair of the U.N. negotiations, said:

"We have closed a chapter on a journey that has taken four years of often intense, but ultimately successful negotiations and opened a new chapter towards a sustainable future."

"Adoption of a global legal agreement on mercury is a major accomplishment," said **Michael T. Bender**, co-coordinator of the **Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG)**, an environmental NGO. "Yet the instrument is hampered by weak controls on mercury emissions from major sources like coal-fired power plants."

Elena Lymberidi-Settimo of **European Environmental Bureau** and co-coordinator of **ZMWG** said:

"Some of these steps were unthinkable just a couple of years ago. Now, alternatives exist for most all products containing mercury. 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."

<http://www.euractiv.com/science-policymaking/un-reaches-binding-global-deal-c-news-517206>