

5 Women Ministers from the African region and WHO call for immediate action to stop mercury pollution in ASGM, to protect women and children's health, at the Minamata Convention on Mercury, Kumamoto, Japan, October 10

(Kumamoto, Japan) - **Five women ministers of environment from the South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya spoke at today's high level event on "Women and Mercury in Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining (ASGM) – health impacts on women and future generations". The event was organised by WECF, IPEN and co-hosted by the Deputy Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs of South Africa, co-chair of the Network of Women Minister and Leaders for the Environment.**

"Women and children make up 30-50% of the workforce in small scale gold mining in Africa, which due to the current 'gold rush' is leading to increased use and pollution with mercury," said Deputy Minister of Environment and Water Ms. Mabudafhasi of **South Africa**. "We have to learn from the Minamata tragedy. It is because of the tragedy of the mercury poisoning of women in Minamata, and the terrible birth defects it caused in their children and children's children, that we are here this week to sign the Minamata Convention on ending the use of mercury."

The Ambassador for Sustainable Development from **Sweden**, Ms. Markovic, recalled that mercury is one of the most deadly poisons for humans and all living beings, which is why Sweden adopted an **export ban on mercury** already in 1997, "not wanting to export their mercury pollution elsewhere. The **precautionary principle** is crucial!". She also called on countries to include sound chemicals management in their proposals for **Sustainable Development Goals** (post2015).

The Minister of Environment of **Mozambique**, Ms. Antonio de Abreu, recognized that "mercury contamination from ASGM is already at a critical level, children are born unhealthy in the ASGM communities, but nobody knows that this is due to the mercury poisoning".

The Minister of Environment of **Tanzania**, Ms. Huvisa presented a map with all small gold mining sites with an estimated more than 200,000 people working in the mines and likely to be exposed to mercury. She shared her great concern that, "We are about to see an epidemic of Minamata-type diseases all over Africa." She continued to say that, "For Africa, mercury diseases problem may be bigger than climate change issues".



The minister of Tanzania addressing the side event

Talking about the scale of the problem, the Minister of Environment of **Kenya**, **Prof. Judi Wakhungu** confirmed that mercury is the most used chemical in ASGM as it is not prohibited and people are not aware of the danger when they use it. It is very worrying that **ASGM is the largest source of atmospheric mercury emission worldwide** from intentional use. These long distance emission can travel far and last for 1,5 years in the atmosphere and eventually deposited in food and air, and from there **accumulating in the global food-chain**.

Yuyun Ismawati of the NGO **Balifokus Indonesia** and **IPEN** expert for ASGM, has travelled and studied use of mercury in ASGM communities around the world. Somen **30 million people** are engaged in artisanal gold mining around the world in 80 countries. One-third of them are women and children. Women are involved in almost all activities in ASGM. Women are exposed to mercury directly as well as indirectly from the air they inhale and from the water and the food that they eat every day. As tests have shown, already many women have elevated levels of mercury in the blood, hair, urine, breast milk, and in food chain. "I am deeply concerned that we are beginning to **see future 'Minamata tragedies' unravel in front of us now**, which could potentially be avoided if we apply lessons learned from Minamata".

The Minister of Environment of **Malawi**, Ms. Daud, called on colleagues to ensure fast ratification of the Minamata Convention on Mercury, and shared a good practice from her country, where women miners have organised in associations. "We need to organise and empower our women to get them out of poverty! They can run big businesses, they should not be forced to survive in precarious and dangerous mining jobs". She said that signing the Minamata Convention fits into the sound chemical management agenda, and the goal to achieve a "zero- mercury" world as stated in the Rio+20 "Future we Want" declaration by all states worldwide".

Concern about the long-term impact of mercury in ASGM, the **Swiss** representative Ms. Pagotto stated that the role of women needs specific attention. "Switzerland is pledging 6 million Swiss Francs for practical projects to eliminate mercury in ASGM, and we recommend other countries to mainstream gender aspects in these projects".

The renowned Minamata expert, Prof Dr **Med. Toshihide Tsuda**, of Okayama University, recalled that when the Minamata tragedy happened, it was still believed that poison could not easily pass the placenta. Then we learnt this was not the case, the human body, including the placenta, is part of the environment. Prof. Tsuda showed pictures and medical records of small children contaminated with methyl mercury, the first patients of Minamata disease, some who died at early age, others at middle age, but whose symptoms and suffering never improved over the years. The early warning and medical recommendation to apply the food sanitation act, and tell people in Minamata not to eat the fish from the bay, were ignored by the government and no action taken. He showed - using the records of mercury levels in cord blood, - that had action been taken, severe damage could have been avoided, and the health of thousands of children in first and second generation would have been saved.

Dr. Maria Neira of the **World Health Organisation** (WHO) followed by stating that "we need no more research, we know the health effects of mercury. We should not wait another 20 years, not even 20 days, to stop mercury contamination in ASGM now". She reminded the delegates that they "are not only signing a environmental convention, but **also a public health convention**. The ministers of environment should work together with the ministers of health to develop health measures in the national action plan on elimination of mercury in ASGM" (article 7 in annex C).

Yuyun Ismawati continued to explain that „alternatives to mercury are radially available; and not only borax or cyanide". Even when communities stop using mercury, we still need to clean up the contaminated sites, and this is very costly. And who will pay for the clean up? Few countries can afford the hundreds of millions which went into cleaning up Minamata bay. **The cost of inaction is great**. "Governments must begin planning now to anticipate and prevent similar contaminations in ASGM sites. Otherwise, the legacy of the current worldwide gold rush, will be hundreds or thousands or highly contaminated sites and devastated communities around the world. We call on the responsibility

of exporting countries, they should stop exporting harm to other countries. Japan for example, should stop its mercury exports immediately”.

All ministers and participants agreed that poverty needs to be addressed, as well as awareness raising and capacity building of women and men in ASGM communities. Ismawati “the real focus should be on developing alternative livelihoods, not based on the extractives sector” said Yuyun Ismawati. All these points should be taken into the national action plans for elimination of mercury in ASGM. These action plans should be made in consultation with local stakeholders, based on “local action plans” in which women are equally represented in defining needs and implementing measures.

Sascha Gabizon, director of WECF International, and co-organiser of the event summarized the suggestions from the ministers to develop a step by step action plan focussing on ending women’s exposure to mercury in ASGM, in coalition with a global alliance with for example UNEP and WHO and financed by a combination of instruments from ODA, GEF and other IFI funding mechanisms. A few of the key action points should include:

- 1) **Fast ratification by all countries of the Minamata Convention** on Mercury.
- 2) **Promoting an ambitious universal Sustainable Development Goal** (Post2015) on eliminating harmful chemicals including targets for fast elimination of mercury emissions, and indicators addressing gender aspects and the ASGM sector.
- 3) Establishing policy processes **integrating policies from both the environmental as well as health ministries** in all countries and at regional levels, including joint action plans at national and local level for elimination of mercury in ASGM and clean up of mercury contaminated sites, involving local civil society organisations including women’s organisations.
- 4) Mercury exporting countries to commit to **banning immediately the trade in mercury**, including mercury containing industrial waste. Japan can take the lead amongst those countries, which have not yet banned exports whereas countries who are only importing (all African countries) should start stopping mercury at the borders.
- 5) Developing a **global partnership program** on protecting women from harmful chemicals, with a specific implementation program with a focus on **protecting women’s health from mercury use in ASGM** as well as creating alternative non-extractive-based ‘green’ livelihoods for women.

Deputy Minister **Mabudafhasi** concluded that she would “bring the conclusions from this event back to the Network of Women Ministers and Leaders for the Environment” and that it is time that we “work with all our colleagues Ministers of Health, Labour and Mining to end mercury contamination for women, men and children in ASGM”.

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The High Level Side Event “Women and Mercury in ASGM – Impacts on Women’s Health and that of Future Generations” was organised by WECF International and IPEN, the Women’s Major Group at UNEP and co-hosted by the co-chair of the Network for Women Ministers and Leaders for the Environment (NWMLE), H.E. Mabudafhasi, Deputy Minister for Water and Environmental Affairs of South Africa. The NWMLE is hosted at UNEP, the United Nations Environment Program in Nairobi. The event received support from the Swiss government and the Danish Ministry of Environment. See http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Portals/9/Mercury/Documents/dipcon/Side%20Events/7-Concept%20Note_WECF-IPEN%20side%20event.pdf