

UN-backed treaty on mercury to enter into force; 'pivotal moment' in combat against harmful chemicals

19 May 2017 – The world took an historic step forward in the fight against mercury poisoning as the European Union and seven of its member States ratified the first new global convention related to the environment and health in close to a decade, according to the United Nations.

“The Minamata Convention demonstrates a global commitment to protecting human health and the environment.” said Secretary General, António Guterres in a press [statement](#). “Today’s action shows how problems that affect us all can also bring us together for the common good.”

Having been signed by 128 countries, the [Minamata Convention on Mercury](#) will come into force in 90 days – on 16 August 2017 – after being ratified by Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania and Sweden.

According to the UN Environmental Programme ([UNEP](#)), the Convention commits governments to specific measures to control the entire “lifecycle” of man-made mercury pollution, one of the world’s top ten chemical threats to health.

This includes banning new mercury mines, phasing-out existing ones, regulating artisanal and small-scale gold mining, and reducing emissions and mercury use. Since the element is indestructible, the Convention also stipulates conditions for interim storage and disposal of mercury waste.

UNEP also pointed out that there are no safe levels of exposure to mercury and everyone is at risk because the dangerous heavy metal has spread to the remotest parts of the earth and can be found in everyday products, including cosmetics, lightbulbs, batteries and teeth fillings.

Children, newborn and unborn babies are most vulnerable, along with populations who eat contaminated fish, those who use mercury at work, and people who live near of a source of mercury pollution or in colder climates where the dangerous heavy metal tends to accumulate.

“Who wants to live in a world where putting on makeup, powering our phones and even buying a wedding ring depends on exposing millions of people to the [risk of mercury poisoning](#)?” said UN Environment chief Erik Solheim.

“But with mercury we have solutions that are as obvious as the problem itself. There are alternatives to all of mercury’s current applications, such as newer, safer industrial processes. Big and small countries can all play a role – as can the man and woman in the street, just by changing what they buy and use,” he added.

Up to 8,900 metric tonnes of mercury are emitted each year. It can be

released naturally through the weathering of mercury-containing rocks, forest fires and volcanic eruptions, but significant emissions also come from human processes, particularly coal burning and artisanal and small-scale gold mining. Mining alone exposes up to 15 million workers in 70 different countries to mercury poisoning, including child labourers.

Other man-made sources of mercury pollution include the production of chlorine and some plastics, waste incineration and use of mercury in laboratories, pharmaceuticals, preservatives, paints and jewellery.

Taking its name from the most severe mercury poisoning disaster in history, in 1956 local villages suffered convulsions, psychosis, loss of consciousness and coma from eating the fish in Minamata Bay, Japan, in which industrial wastewaters had been dumped since the 1930s. Thousands of people were certified as having directly suffered from mercury poisoning, now known as Minamata disease.