

# **TREATY TO CUT MERCURY POLLUTION SIGNED BY 92 COUNTRIES**

A ground-breaking, legally-binding global treaty on reducing mercury pollution has been signed by 92 countries.

The treaty spells “the beginning of the end of mercury as a threat to human health and the environment”, UN Environment Programme (UNEP) executive director Achim Steiner, told a diplomatic meeting in Japan earlier this month (10-11 October) where the treaty was signed.

But much work remains to provide the funding and technical and scientific advice needed to implement the treaty, and to expand mercury monitoring capacity worldwide, experts say

The Minamata Convention on Mercury will come into force once 50 countries have ratified it. It was agreed in Geneva in January.

“We’re hoping that it will take a maximum of three years for ratification and that we will have early ratification based on the overwhelming support we have seen here, with 92 signatories and 139 countries in

attendance,” Tim Kasten, deputy director of UNEP’s Division of Environmental Policy Implementation tells *SciDev.Net*.

The treaty bans a range of mercury products by 2020 and will forbid the mining of fresh mercury and mercury emissions from new power plants within 15 years of the treaty coming into effect.

“The provisions for capacity building and technical and financial assistance provide pathways to assist poorer countries and communities to be part of this remarkable global effort”

Countries will also be required to draw up plans to curb artisanal and small-scale gold mining operations — one of the biggest contributors to mercury pollution, according to UNEP January report ‘Global Mercury Assessment 2013’.

The ministerial conference in Kumamoto, Japan, discussed what needs to be done in the interim period until the treaty comes into force, including identifying the assistance required to help developing countries draw up mercury inventories.

The work ahead “includes a thorough scientific review of the mercury problems in their country — where the sources are, what kind of products are being made, what kind of emissions they may have,” Kasten tells *SciDev.Net*.

Western nations and international funds will donate funds to assist with this and other treaty requirements.

“The provisions for capacity building and technical and financial assistance — for example via [financing organisation] the Global Environment Facility and voluntary contributions — provide pathways to assist poorer countries and communities to be part of this remarkable global effort,” Steiner said.

### **Funding pledges**

Japan pledged at the meeting to provide US\$1 million towards drawing up international laws to regulate mercury, build capacity in developing countries and assist in finding industrial technologies to replace the need for mercury in mining and industry.

Switzerland announced a contribution of 7.5 million francs (around US\$8.3 million), up from a pledge in January of 1 million francs.

Six million Swiss francs will go towards improving conditions in the artisanal and small-scale gold mining sector, Switzerland's energy minister, Doris Leuthard, said.

Switzerland "will support the introduction of environmental, social and legal standards and technology in this sector," she told the delegates.

The rest of the funding will support ratification and early implementation of the convention.

Sweden announced an unspecified amount and Finland pledged €300,000 (about US\$332,000) for the interim period. China and Norway made funding promises earlier in the year.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) had previously allocated US\$15 million to mercury control measures. In June, it agreed another US\$10 million under a funding round that lasts until 2014.

The US\$25 million GEF funding and other pledges mean that upwards of US\$30 million will be available to implement the convention before the treaty comes into force. But Kasten says this is well short of the US\$100 million needed to assist countries with implementation before then.

## **Science advice**

The ministerial meeting also discussed establishing an experts group to provide technical and scientific guidance.

“It will be a fairly significant undertaking to help identify what the best available technology and best available environmental practice requirements will be,” Kasten says.

A number of partnerships with the scientific community running parallel to the formal convention will continue to operate, says Noelle Selin, assistant professor in engineering systems and atmospheric chemistry at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States.

“We need to get better at not only monitoring, but also the modelling tools and interpretation tools that allow us to figure out where the mercury is coming from.”

But monitoring will also be crucial for assessing compliance, says

Nicola Pirrone, coordinator of the Global Mercury Observation System (GMOS), a project to establish a worldwide system for measuring mercury in the environment.

He says there are currently 45 monitoring stations around the world, but there is a lack of measurement in the Southern Hemisphere.

“What is needed for the convention is to have a global observing system that can provide data on mercury concentrations in all environmental areas,” including the oceans, he says.

If the system can be extended to a greater number of developing countries, it will help monitor whether the convention is effective, Pirrone says. “We are hoping to establish additional monitoring sites in artisanal gold mining areas, particularly Venezuela, Brazil and Chile.”

Source: <http://www.scidev.net/global/pollution/news/treaty-to-cut-mercury-pollution-signed-by-92-countries.html>