

United Nations Statement - Kyrgyzstan Primary Mercury Mine

- Kyrgyz National Forum, 6 July 2009
- United Nations Resident Coordinator in Kyrgyz Republic, Mr. Neal Walker

On behalf of the United Nations, I wish to express sincere appreciation to the Kyrgyz Republic for organizing this important National Forum and for the invitation and opportunity to speak on the future of mercury mining in Kyrgyzstan. I would also like to acknowledge the specialized expertise of the United Nations Environment Programme in this complex area, and to thank them for their support to date on addressing the issue both globally and in Kyrgyzstan.

Scientific evidence of mercury accumulation in the environment has been available for well over a century. It has also been well documented that the exposure of people to mercury poses serious health risks. Mercury can severely affect people living and working around a mercury source. But beyond the communities that work with mercury mining, its danger can spread far and wide. Once released in the atmosphere or released through river systems and watersheds, mercury can travel hundreds and thousands of miles and accumulates in the food chain, with potentially serious effects for people far from the source. In recognition of these facts, most governments have imposed bans or warned their citizens of the dangers posed by consumption of certain foods, particularly fish, known to contain mercury.

For some years, governments have recognized that unilateral action is not enough to protect their people and their environment from mercury. Thus, the United Nations Environment Programme UNEP has been directed to assess the impact of mercury to determine the appropriate course of action at the global level. That work culminated in February this year, in the agreement reached by consensus of over 140 governments (including the Kyrgyz Republic) represented at the 25th session of the UNEP Governing Council. The Decision by the Governing Council defines a policy framework and a strategic approach to the international management of chemicals, including mercury. The decision explicitly calls for the reduction of mercury supply from primary mining.

Still, there is a long way to go. Negotiations of a global mercury treaty will begin in 2010 with the objective of reducing the mercury released from human activity and with the goal of completing negotiations in early 2013. The importance and urgency of international actions on mercury through the Global Mercury Partnership is recognized by the UNEP Governing Council, including the reduction of the supply of mercury from primary mercury mining, which is explicitly mentioned as an area for continued efforts.

The specific reference in the policy framework to consider the prohibition of new primary mining and a phase out of existing primary mining, does recognize the importance of taking into account the economic circumstances of countries. Ultimately, reducing mercury supply will drive innovation and help reduce international trade and demand for mercury in products and processes. This may be the only way to make a real difference in a complex sector like artisanal and small scale gold mining, practiced in approximately 50 countries globally.

In making this decision, the UNEP Governing Council recognized the possible difficulties that might be faced by governments and by specific industries currently using mercury. The decision requests specifically that arrangements set out in the treaty should be flexible and tailored to the characteristics of specific sectors, recognizing that the ability of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to implement some legal obligations is dependent on the availability of capacity building, technical assistance and adequate financial assistance. But the end objective is clear: The UNEP Governing Council has set out an unequivocal vision of a low mercury future.

It is within this significant and clear global context that in Khairdarkan, the Kyrgyz Republic operates the last primary mercury mine known to export mercury to the global market-place. I reiterate, this is the only mercury mine left in the world that is known to be still exporting mercury. The United Nations recognizes a clear dilemma: on the one hand the plant provides 600 jobs in a region where employment is scarce; on the other hand, the mine's mercury production poses a real health threat for those very same workers and to the people in the surrounding communities. UNEP and its partners are pleased to assist the Kyrgyz Republic in assessing the technical and socio-economic importance of the mercury mining operations to its local community and to national economic and development efforts. The ultimate goal of our work is to help the Kyrgyz Republic to put in place sustainable development plans that do not rely on income from the primary production of mercury and in doing so to allow the Kyrgyz Republic to take action to move away from mercury production.

I would like to emphasize that the primary beneficiaries of development plans that do **not** rely on the mercury mine are the people of Khairdarkan and the workers at the plant, even while the closure of the mine will clearly contribute to the global common good. This has also been acknowledged in a number of very constructive discussions that have taken place between Kyrgyzstan and the international community at various international mercury meetings over the last year.

The United Nations can confirm the strong commitment of the international community to help Kyrgyzstan move away from primary mercury mining into more socially and environmentally sustainable activities. In recognition of the important economic value that this mining operation brings to region 500,000 US Dollars of secured funding has been identified from a network of donors in the international community to finance short term actions. Activities that might be suitable for funding range from the decommissioning and remediation of the mine to the critically important development of alternative economic activities through specific development projects in the area.

Another opportunity to assist Kyrgyzstan is the UNEP hosted international forum on mercury in Bangkok in October 2009. One of our objectives will be to help Kyrgyzstan further outline to the international community the status of the mine as well as alternative development needs and intentions in any possible near term transition process.

In order to move forward with this important work with the support of the international community, we would like to suggest that the Government of Kyrgyzstan through this national forum send the following clear signals to its development partners:

- First, that privatization of the mine and its mercury activities will not be considered;
- Second, that, in retaining ownership of the mine, the Government of Kyrgyzstan is united and committed to its transition and to the cessation of mercury production as quickly as is feasible. We reiterate that this commitment carries a parallel commitment by the international community to support the development of greener economic activities that will provide greater benefit to the local communities.
- Finally, we believe that it would be appropriate and accurate for the government to recognize that the phase out of mercury mining is a national priority, first and foremost because it will contribute to the country's poverty reduction strategy, but it would ultimately because it would also contribute to the commitment of Kyrgyzstan and of the other countries of the world to manage chemicals in a sustainable way.

We believe that such signals will be an important contribution of one country to the world phase out of mercury and will benefit Kyrgyzstan by providing a unique opportunity to design a greener economy for the country, make a real difference to the global environment, and gain a leading international role in achieving global mercury reduction and, ultimately, a mercury-free future!

Thank you.