



Media Release

Little progress on atmospheric mercury emissions at fourth UN negotiations

10 July 2012 - Punta del Este, Uruguay/Ottawa, Canada – The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) fourth Intergovernmental Negotiations Committee (INC) met from June 27th until July 2nd in Punta del Este, Uruguay. The goal of the negotiations is to have a legally binding, global treaty on mercury ready for adoption by October 2013.

The negotiations are important for Inuit because in some areas of the Arctic levels of this toxic element are increasing to an extent that may affect the health of wildlife and humans. This is underlined by recent health advisories for women of childbearing age that were issued by two different Canadian regional governments due to mercury: one for ringed seal liver (Nunavut, June 28th, 2012; <http://www.gov.nu.ca/news/2012/june/jun28.pdf>) and one for beluga meat (Nunavik, October 5th, 2011; www.rrss17.gouv.qc.ca).

Although mercury occurs naturally, studies suggest that on average over 90% of the mercury present in the Arctic today originated from human sources. Currently, the largest mercury emissions stem from coal-based energy consumption in rapidly growing economies, particularly in Asia. Because these emissions then undergo long-range transport and are deposited in far-away places such as the Arctic, a global treaty is needed to control this trans-boundary source. However, a recent study using computer simulations found that Arctic rivers are likely a large source of mercury to the Arctic Ocean that has so far been overlooked. The rapid climate change experienced in the Arctic further contributes to the mobilization of mercury present in soils, for example by thawing permafrost and boreal wildfires.

The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) was represented at the mercury negotiations by Eva Krummel from ICC Canada as an advisor to the Canadian delegation, and Parnuna Egede from ICC Greenland as an independent observer.

In an intervention addressing the plenary, Parnuna Egede stated:

“Not only are we exposed to contamination from a cocktail of contaminants, mercury being one of them, mostly from sources outside the Arctic. We are also strongly affected by climate change, with temperatures increasing twice as fast as other parts of the world. [...] This combination of contamination and climate change constitutes our Arctic double curse, and it is not of our doing. That is why we turn to the world community, to ask for your help to create a strong instrument on mercury, especially with regards to atmospheric emissions and releases.”

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Parnuna Egede from ICC Greenland speaks to the plenary of INC-4 about how mercury affects Inuit. (Picture taken by Eva Kruemmel)

Even though some progress was made during the negotiations, delegates were arguing around what the most crucial issues are how and they should be addressed – overall stalling the discussions on several fronts. Some countries felt that mercury air emissions are the most important because they are a truly global problem due to atmospheric transport, and cannot be addressed solely through national actions. Other countries stressed that releases to water and land are just as important, and needed to be treated equally. Canada mentioned in its interventions the importance of mercury emissions to air, and particularly emphasized the impact it has on its indigenous peoples.

Although countries generally agreed on the importance of human health, delegates were unable to agree on how health needs to be addressed in the treaty. While a great majority of developing countries wanted to see a separate article specifically referring to health, many developed countries were of the opinion that this could be addressed throughout the treaty text, namely in other articles where it is applicable.

“It is very encouraging to see Canada highlighting the importance of this treaty for Canadian indigenous peoples in the Arctic.”, said Duane Smith, ICC Canada’s president. “I hope that all countries will intensify their intersessional work with the aim to reach a strong treaty at the last meeting. There is not much time left to ensure that the negotiations are ending successfully, and all of the concerns need to be addressed adequately.”

A total of five negotiation committee meetings have been projected, and the last one will take place 14 – 19 January next year in Geneva, Switzerland.

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