



A treaty regulating emissions and releases of mercury, the first new global convention on environment and health for close to a decade, opened today for signatures.

Japan, a country which has come to epitomize mercury poisoning in modern times, today became one of the first countries to sign the historic new international convention to reduce emissions and releases of the toxic metal into air, land and water and to phase out many products that contain mercury.

[The Minamata Convention on Mercury](#) - a global, legally binding treaty which opened for signature today - was agreed to by governments in January and formally adopted as international law today.

The new treaty is the first new global convention on environment and health for close to a decade. Coming at a time when some multilateral negotiations have faced challenges, its successful negotiation, after a four-year process, provides a new momentum to intergovernmental cooperation on the environment.

Its agreement is also significant in that many countries, despite the lingering effects of the global financial crisis, remained prepared to commit resources to combating the harmful effects of

mercury.

Countries began the recognition for this new treaty at a special ceremonial opening of the Diplomatic Conference in Minamata, the city where many local people were poisoned in the mid-20th Century after eating mercury-contaminated seafood from Minamata Bay. As a consequence, the neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning has come to be known as Minamata Disease.

The Minamata Convention provides for controls and reductions across a range of products, processes and industries where mercury is used, released or emitted. The treaty also addresses the direct mining of mercury, export and import of the metal, and safe storage of waste mercury.

Pinpointing populations at risk, boosting medical care and better training of health-care professionals in identifying and treating mercury-related effects will all result from adherence to the obligations of the new treaty.

"Mercury has some severe effects, both on human health and on the environment. UNEP has been proud to facilitate and support the treaty negotiation over the past four years because almost everyone in the world - be they small-scale gold miners, expectant mothers or waste-handlers in developing countries - will benefit from its provisions," said Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Mercury's impacts on the human nervous system have been known for more than a century: the Mad Hatter of Alice in Wonderland fame was so called because hat-makers used the liquid metal to strengthen brims, breathing in the poisonous fumes.

Other potential impacts include impaired thyroid and liver function, irritability, tremors, disturbances to vision, memory loss and cardiovascular problems.

"Mercury is one of the top ten chemicals of major public health concern and is a substance which disperses into and remains in ecosystems for generations, causing severe ill health and

## **New mercury treaty signed**

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intellectual impairment to exposed

□ *Photo: Nobuteru Ishihara, Minister of Environment, Japan, Achim Steiner, UNEP Executive Director, Ikuo Kabashima, Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture, and Katsuaki Miyamoto, Mayor of Minamata*