

Ban-Hg-Wg

Ban Mercury Working Group

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Activist Demand That UNILEVER Halt Toxic Trade in Mercury from India

NEW YORK –A ship carrying 290 metric tons of toxic mercury-laden waste that contaminated a community in India arrives today into New York harbor amid demands that the circle of poison be ended and the mercury permanently stored--and not allowed recycled into the global marketplace. A coalition composed of Greenpeace, Ban Mercury Working Group, and Clean Air Council have asked UNILEVER for a meeting to negotiate a permanent retirement of the mercury.

“It will be a travesty of environmental justice if the same toxic mercury waste that damaged the people and the environment in India merely gets recycled and then sold, where it will continue its cycle of poisoning developing countries again,” said Ameer Shahul of Greenpeace India.

Due to its severe toxicity, mercury use is increasingly being phased out in the US and EU. The excess mercury is then often sent to developing countries for haphazard use and release.

“UNILEVER should purge its mercury double standard on developing countries like India, considering that mercury-containing products have been banned for many years in the Netherlands, UNILEVER’s home state,” said Eco Matser, toxic campaigner at Greenpeace Netherlands.

Environmental groups contend that instead of retiring the resulting mercury glut in safe and monitored perpetual storage, it is being dumped on to the world market, ushering in cheaper mercury prices which, in turn, increases use and subsequent harmful release.

“The toxic buck must stop here,” said Michael Bender of the Mercury Policy Project, and representative of the Ban-Mercury-Working Group. “Just like the mercury from the closed Holtra-Chem chloralkali facility in Maine, UNILEVER should place their mercury in long-term, monitored storage.”

The mercury waste—an assortment of waste glass contaminated with mercury, effluent sludge, broken thermometers and metallic mercury—is destined for Hellertown, Pennsylvania where it is expected to be recycled by Bethlehem Apparatus, Co. Under an agreement with the local authorities, the mercury waste was collected from a thermometer factory owned by the UNILEVER subsidiary, Hindustan Lever Limited, located in the town of Kodaikanal, state of Tamil Nadu, India.

“The life-cycle of mercury is really a death cycle with every step, from mining, trade, use, and recycling; putting the planet at levels of risk and harm we can no longer afford,” said Aaron Firestone of the Clean Air Council in Pennsylvania. “It’s time to say enough.”

Of particular concern to advocates worldwide is the expected closing of 10 mercury cell chloralkali plants in the US and the mandatory dismantling of 47 such plants in Europe by 2007 that use mercury in their production process. If policies aren't changed, the dismantling will free-up 15,000 metric tons of mercury for resale in Europe and from 1,500 to 2,500 metric tons in the US.

UNILEVER has already been found guilty of exploiting lax environmental regulations and cheap labor in countries like India," said Richard Gutierrez of the Basel Action Network. "We call on them to rectify their mistake by putting a decisive end to the mercury death spiral."

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For more information:

<http://www.mercurypolicy.org/new/documents/finalUnileverletter052803.pdf>

<http://zope.greenpeace.org/z/gpindia/welcome>

<http://www.ban.org/Ban-Hg-Wg>

<http://www.chem.unep.ch/mercury>

<http://www.cleanair.org>