

## Minamata mercury treaty signed at UN conference (Update)

October 10 2013, by Kyoko Hasegawa

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Japanese Environment Minister Nobuteru Ishihara (R) and Achim Steiner (L), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director lay flowers on the memorial for the victims of 1950s mercury poisoning at Minamata city on October 9, 2013

Delegates from some 140 countries and territories Thursday signed a

United Nations treaty to control mercury near the site of Japan's worst industrial poisoning, after Tokyo pledged \$2 billion to help poorer nations combat pollution.

The delegates gathered in Minamata city to sign the world's first legally binding treaty on the highly toxic metal.

The Minamata Convention on Mercury is named after the Japanese city where tens of thousands of people were poisoned—around 2,000 of whom have since died—by eating fish and shellfish taken from waters polluted by discharge from a local factory.

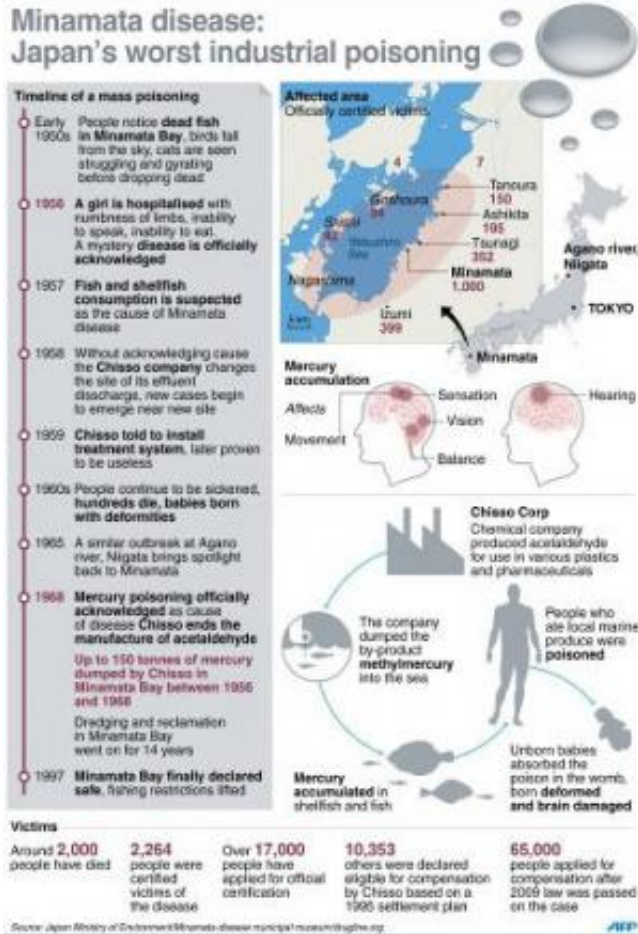
The treaty will take effect once ratified by 50 countries—something organiser the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) expects will take three to four years.

"This is the first step the human race has taken to reduce the threat posed by mercury," conference chair and Japanese environment minister Nobuteru Ishihara told reporters.

"We will work hard so that many countries ratify the treaty soon," he said.

Minamata is a byword in Japan for sluggish official responses and the development-at-all costs that characterised the decades of booming growth after World War II.

The poisoning was brought to light in the mid-1950s by a doctor whose patients had damaged immune systems or who had developed brain or nervous system problems. Industrial pollution was suggested as a possible cause shortly thereafter.



Graphic fact file on Minamata disease in the 1950s and 1960s, Japan's worst ever industrial poisoning

But it was not until 1968 that the factory stopped pumping out its mercury-laden waste.

In a video message to the opening ceremony Wednesday, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged \$2 billion to help developing nations address environmental pollution between 2014 and 2016.

"Precisely because we experienced and overcame damage from mercury, Japan bears responsibility for spearheading the world's efforts to

eliminate it," Abe said.

But the comments provoked anger in Minamata, where many are still suffering the effects of decades of toxic dumping.

"The government, which bears responsibility, should not declare it has 'overcame' the issue. We are still on the way to overcoming Minamata disease," sufferer Masami Ogata, 55, told the mass-selling Yomiuri Shimbun.

The treaty sets a phase-out date of 2020 for a long list of products—including mercury thermometers—and gives governments 15 years to end all mercury mining.

But environmental groups say it stops short of addressing the use of mercury in artisanal and small-scale gold mining, which directly threatens the health of miners including child labourers in developing countries.

They also warn of health risks from eating the mercury-polluted meat of whales and dolphins, which occasionally feature in the diet of some coastal communities in Japan and elsewhere.

Because of their position near the top of the food chain, dolphins and whales frequently consume a large quantity of the mercury that has made its way into the oceans.

A UNEP report issued last year said the spiralling use of chemicals, especially in developing countries, is damaging people's health and the environment.

Many developing countries lack safeguards for handling chemicals safely or disposing of them properly, according to the report, entitled "Global

Chemicals Outlook".

"Poor management of volatile organic compounds is responsible for global economic losses estimated at \$236.3 billion (188 billion euros)," the UNEP said.

"Exposure to mercury results in health and environmental damage estimated at \$22 billion," it said.

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