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For More Information

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High Contamination Levels Make Douala a Mercury"Hotspot"

Final Negotiation on International Mercury Treaty Begins Jan. 13

(**Yaoundé**) A new report finds that high mercury levels in human regularly exceed health advisory guidelines and have created a mercury "hotspot" in Douala. The report highlights the urgent need for an overall reduction in mercury emissions as government delegates convene next week in Geneva for a final negotiating session to establish an international mercury treaty – the first global treaty on the environment in more than a decade by theUnited Nations Environment Programme.

In total, 19 participants from Youpwe and Takele fishing community in Douala provided hair samples for testing. The results obtained can be interpreted in two groups; 17 samples with similar levels and two samples with extremely high mercury levels (546 ppm and 541 ppm). The group of 17 samples shows average mercury levels almost 2-times higher than the US EPA reference dose and a maximum mercury value that is 3.8-times higher than the reference dose. Three-fourths (76%) of the samples in this group exceeded the reference dose and the four samples below this reference dose were close to 1 ppm (see minimum THg level = 0.832 ppm). Two samples showed extremely high mercury levels (greater 500 ppm) that grossly exceeded the reference dose. These results were re-checked in the lab analysis to insure that the levels were correct.

"This report clearly demonstrates the urgent need to reduce overall mercury emissions to air, land, and water. Fish is a common part of the diet in Douala and is especially pronounced in the fishing community of Youpwe-Takele. This is the most likely reason for the elevated levels of mercury in hair found in this study," said Doctor KUEPOUO Gilbert, the Coordinator of CREPD.

The report released today in CAMEROON is part of a larger project conducted by the scientific team of the Biodiversity Research Institute and IPEN, a global network of non-governmental organizations. A report, ***Global Mercury Hotspots,*** to be issued on *January 9, 2013* by IPEN and BRI brings together new data on mercury concentrations in fish and human hair samples and identified, for the first time, a set of global biological hotspots where elevated levels of mercury are sufficient to pose serious threats to both ecosystems and human health.

“Fish and human hair from around the world regularly exceeded health advisory mercury levels,” affirms Doctor KUEPOUO Gilbert, the Coordinator of CREPD. “The results demonstrate the need for a mercury treaty that mandates true reductions of mercury emissions – not just to air but to land and water as well. Mercury is a large and serious global threat to human health that requires a robust and ambitious global response.”

Concluding negotiations on the mercury treaty will take place 13-18 January, 2013 in Geneva, Switzerland.

There are also growing objections to naming the treaty the Minamata Convention, as proposed by a former Japanese prime minister, and holding the treaty signing ceremony in Minamata, Japan, a site where mercury contamination has devastated the community’s human and animal population for decades. As currently proposed, the treaty does not contain any obligations to identify or cleanup contaminated sites, does not require polluters to pay for health damages or environmental cleanup or provide for protection from similar disasters occurring anywhere in the world. Objections to the name have been raised by some government delegates, the Minamata City Council, and some survivors of the tragedy.

Human activities such as burning coal, mining and refining metal ores, and the manufacture of cement release mercury into the environment. Large intentional uses of mercury today include small-scale gold mining and vinyl chloride monomer production. Coal combustion is also a significant contributor to atmospheric mercury emissions and subsequent global deposition. Much of the mercury produced and used eventually volatizes into the atmosphere and travels around the globe, eventually falling back to the earth or ocean.

When mercury falls into the ocean, microorganisms transform it into an especially toxic form of mercury, methylmercury, which then becomes part of the food chain. Methylmercury is readily absorbed by the body and people are exposed primarily through the consumption of fish. Many national and international health organizations recognize mercury in fish as a threat to human health, livelihoods and the environment.

The dangers of mercury poisoning have been known for centuries. Exposure to high levels of mercury can permanently damage the brain and kidneys. Harmful effects are also passed from a mother to her developing fetus and can result in brain damage, mental retardation, blindness, seizures and an inability to speak.

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CREPD is a Cameroon based NGO created since 2004 dedicated to bridge the gap between science and action in Cameroon and sub-Sahara Africa and to promote sustainable development; It is IPEN participatory organization focuses on health and environmental issues.
IPEN’s mission is a toxics-free future for all. The IPEN network is comprised of more than 700 public-interest organizations in 116 countries. IPEN leaders include grassroots activists and nationally and internationally recognized experts in the fields of science, health, environment and public policy.

The mission of **Biodiversity Research Institute** is to assess emerging threats to wildlife and ecosystems through collaborative research and to use scientific findings to advance environmental awareness and inform decision-makers.