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Global Alliance to Fight Toxic Pollution

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A global alliance to protect the world's people from toxic lead, chromium, mercury, pesticides and other pollution has been formed by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, U.N. agencies, donor countries, foundations and non-government experts in July.

The Global Alliance for Health and Pollution (GAHP) aims to work together to protect the health of over one hundred million people in poor countries who are at risk from toxic pollution.

The group will work with governments to clean-up toxic hotspots where children, especially, are being poisoned. It could also respond to emergencies such as a recent lead poisoning outbreak in Nigeria that killed hundreds of children.

The Alliance was formed in July when a dozen major organizations met at Bellagio, Italy, hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation. GAHP aims to deal with problems similar to that which occurred in Love Canal in the 1970s in the United States. Thousands of sites like those can now be found around the world in low and middle income countries.

The executive committee of the GAHP will be based at the World Bank. Blacksmith Institute, a non-government organization that is cleaning toxic sites in dozens of developing countries, will serve as the Alliance's secretariat.

Several affected countries, including Indonesia, Philippines, Mexico and Senegal sent senior delegates to the founding meeting.

Richard Fuller, CEO of Blacksmith Institute, said the Alliance is open to all donor groups as well as countries.

"In affected countries, GAHP will work not just with the ministry of environment" he said. "There is a need to coordinate with ministries of health, industry, and others."

Experts at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, Hunter College School of Public Health, and other institutions recently drafted a study showing that in just three countries -- India, Indonesia and the Philippines -- over ten million people are at risk of brain damage, cancer, liver and kidney disease, and early death due to lead, chromium, mercury, pesticides and other pollutants. The problem of toxic pollution in poor and middle income countries has been growing in recent years as these countries industrialize. Yet little attention has been given to global pollution as it is seen as a local problem.

The report on the impact of toxic chemicals on health is to be published soon. An advance draft shows that exposure to hexavalent chromium (widely used in industry and the cause of the mysterious illness in the film "Erin Brockovich"), as well as lead and other toxins, leave people unable to work to their full ability, imposes a burden of disease throughout their lives and cuts short their lifespans.

Public health specialists who wrote Blacksmith's soon-to-be released report measure toxic impacts on health through acronyms: DALY -- disability adjusted life years; YLD -- years lived with disability; and YLL -- years of life lost.

In the three countries surveyed, India, Indonesia and the Philippines, the study found 10 million people at risk from toxic chemicals and 1.1 million YLL -- years of life lost through early deaths. Alliance members at the Bellagio conference included: the Asian Development Bank; Indonesian environmental NGO KPBB; environment ministries of Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines and Senegal; UN Environment Program; UN Industrial Development Organization; the World Bank; and Blacksmith Institute.

Observers at the meeting or otherwise engaged in the Alliance process, include: the U.S. State Department, Agency for International Development and Environmental Protection Agency; aid agencies from Australia, Germany, and Japan; Canada; the European Commission; the International Council of Chemicals Associations; Global Environment Facility; environment ministries of Norway and Uruguay; Natural Resources Defense Council; Rockefeller Brothers Fund; and the World Health Organization.

Toxins such as lead, mercury, chromium, pesticides and radionuclides affect populations in many countries throughout the world, with thousands of toxic hotspots and well over 100 million people at risk, Blacksmith said in a statement.

Health impacts include: physical and mental disability; organ dysfunction; neurological, reproductive, behavioral and other disorders; cancers; internal and external lesions; reduced life expectancy; and death. In addition, toxins can weaken the body's immune system, rendering it more susceptible to other ailments and diseases.

Children are especially vulnerable.

New studies estimate the burden of disease in some countries appear to be comparable to other public health problems, such as AIDS/HIV, tuberculosis and malaria.

Solutions to these problems exist, and can often be implemented cost effectively. In many cases local basic engineering firms can be trained to remove toxic soils to landfills and to teach miners, lead battery recyclers and others how to work without

emitting pollution.

In the next three years the new Alliance plans to work with poor and middle income countries to focus on toxic pollution and train people to identify toxic hotspots, and raise awareness and political will.

The Alliance will provide technical guidance and launch demonstration projects. It will develop a communications strategy to improve the case for international response and funding. Alliance participation is voluntary, open and does not require a pledge of resources.

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