

Minamata Convention and Japan's Contribution
–Support for Developing Countries to Address Mercury–

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The Diplomatic Conference for the “Minamata Convention on Mercury” is going to be held in Kumamoto and Minamata, Japan, on October 9 to 11, 2013. The text of the Convention will be presented for adoption by the Conference and opened for signature. This Conference is opening a new chapter for global environment protection. I appreciate efforts made by the national government and local citizens to host the Conference.

Mercury circulates to the air and water beyond national borders and poses harmful effects to human health and the environment. This is why global actions are required. To address this global pollutant, the international community had been engaged in international negotiation to elaborate a legally binding instrument on mercury since 2010.

After the intense discussion, the negotiating committee finally agreed to the text of the Convention in January this year. It is known that the most serious case of mercury pollution is Minamata Disease which was caused by methyl mercury. The preamble of the Convention stipulates recognizing the substantial lessons of Minamata Disease, in particular the serious health and environmental effects, and the need to ensure proper management of mercury.

The Convention requires Parties to take actions to reduce emissions and releases of mercury. In this regard, it is key to implement necessary measures in developing countries which sometimes cannot afford to address environmental issues.

For example, artisanal and small-scale gold mining, where mercury amalgamation is used to extract gold from ore, is a major source in developing countries, posing serious threats to workers and the environment. Urgent measures to address this source are needed.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF), which I head as its CEO, is a multilateral fund for global environmental benefits. The GEF is designated to financially support

developing countries to implement the Convention as articulated in the Convention. The GEF will support solid measures on the ground in developing countries.

The lessons from Minamata Disease are that enormous costs in time and money are required to restore the damaged environment. Even a half century later, there are people suffering from the disease. The Japanese Ministry of the Environment reports that the cost of pollution prevention would have been far less than the cost of environmental damage.

These lessons Japan learned should be shared with the world so that developing countries will avoid such tragedy. That would be the essence of the Convention.

Having faced environmental pollutions during its rapid economic growth, Japan has reinforced its policies and measures to protect the environment. Nowadays, Japan can be proud of its environmental laws and regulations as well as the development of environmentally-sound technologies and accumulation of knowledge. For instance, in Japan, end-of-use mercury-containing products such as thermometers and fluorescent lamps are collected separately from general waste at a municipality level, transported safely and disposed of in an environmentally sound manner. The system would not work successfully without relevant regulations, technologies and trained workers. This series of steps is of high standard from an international point of view.

The GEF can play a role in sharing such excellent Japanese systems with developing countries through funding initial cost and supporting development of policies and human capacities.

There is concern that economic development will pose adverse effects on the environment in developing countries. Rather than damaging the environment, it is desirable for them to take a path to sustainable development based on protecting the environment. Japan would benefit from a change of the path in developing countries. The GEF is committed to being a visionary for sustainable development in the developing world.