



## **PRESS RELEASE      GUYANA NEEDS TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT MERCURY**

Opposition allegations that deaths of four GGMC workers are linked to their exposure to mercury have produced the predictable response from the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) that health and safety of workers is among their highest priorities and that they will spare no expense to establish the truth of the allegation. The more fundamental question is why was the original revelation in April that mercury was affecting the health of Gold Board workers not sufficient to trigger a systematic and sustained response to discontinue its use.

Assuming that prolonged contact with mercury contributed to their deaths is the place to start, but by no means the place to end. Both the opposition allegation and the MNR response treat the victims as unfortunate and isolated occurrences rather than predictable.

The link between continued exposure to mercury fumes and possible fatal health consequences is as scientifically well established as the link between cigarette smoking and cancer. The logical response, therefore, is not only generous healthcare packages for the immediate victims – 'though these are needed – but to set in place preventative measures aimed at the systematic and comprehensive eradication of mercury use.

Staggering levels of complacency over the use of mercury in the amalgamating and recovery of gold have resulted in gold smelting taking place all over the city and in the interior. The fact that mercury – or quick-silver - as it is popularly known is carried around by women in their purses, played with by little boys, kept on open shelves in homes lulls people to believe that it is harmless in all circumstances, encouraging casualness over its destructive potential when heated.

None of the regulatory agencies responsible for mining, nor the mining community itself, has demonstrated responsibility over the dangers of mercury use. Mining is dominated by an obsession with money. Nothing which increases costs, regardless of the consequences is taken seriously. This applies to health and safety in the mining operations, protection against disease, use of mercury and the massive environmental costs generated by mining at all levels.

Some evidence of seriousness on all sides would be to link the calls for tax relief, duty-free concessions, preferential fuel prices and other incentives in the industry to reduced levels of mercury. Other evidence would be that mercury eradication figure more prominently in the assessments carried out by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of all levels of the gold industry.

The only official interest shown in the international Convention on eradication of the use of mercury, known as the Minimata Convention, was to seek an extension of the deadline of its application to Guyana. The proof of this assertion is that a clear timetable for the progressive eradication of the sale and use of mercury, together with rigorous monitoring of its implementation, is not yet in place.

Official statements regularly assert that the use of mercury negatively impacts lives and the environment wherever it is in use – whether in Georgetown, or in hinterland communities, and must be eradicated. To this end, the GGDMA and the WWMO are regularly exhorted to cooperate with the various government authorities to eliminate the scourge of mercury from the environment. But cooperate with what?

Guyana's rivers are silent victims of this irresponsible approach to mercury. Communities that depend on fish in the vicinity of mining operations in the South Rupununi have dangerously high levels of mercury in their systems. Studies from societies that take mercury more seriously than we do – Colombia for example – have demonstrated that simply living on a river where mining takes place – even long distances down river – renders communities vulnerable to mercury poisoning because the fish that ingest mercury migrate downstream.

Rather than fixate on assigning blame over the health of Gold Board workers as the central issue, those deaths would be more respectfully honoured by ensuring that they trigger a systematic and sustained campaign to address mercury eradication at the level of law, policy and practice.

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