The use of mercury is being reduced throughout the world due to its effects on human health and the environment. Certain forms of mercury and its compounds can damage neurological development and affect internal organs. Mercury can spread far and wide through air and water. It is ingested by fish and other marine life, where it becomes concentrated as it moves up the food chain.

There is now only one known mercury mine in the world which continues to sell its output abroad: Khaidarkan, in the remote mountains of southern Kyrgyzstan.

What will happen to this “kombinat” is still far from clear. For the international community, continuing mercury mining raises significant concerns. Limiting mercury supply is one of the key elements to any comprehensive global approach to address mercury.

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Khaidarkan mercury

Addressing primary mercury mining in Kyrgyzstan

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Khaidarkan mercury

Addressing primary mercury mining in Kyrgyzstan

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Foreword

UNEP and UNITAR are pleased to present to you this overview document outlining the situation regarding the world's last known exporting mercury mine – at Khaidarkan in southern Kyrgyzstan. For the past two years, significant efforts have been taking place at the international level to assist the Government of Kyrgyzstan and national and local stakeholders to consider options regarding the future of the mine and its associated infrastructure.

What is known as "primary" mercury mining is almost a thing of the past. Significant international efforts are taking place under the auspices of UNEP, to ensure that a global legally binding instrument will be agreed by 2013. The issue of mercury supply is to be addressed during these negotiations. The continued introduction of "new" mercury from the Khaidarkan mine – which adds to the already significant international supply of mercury currently being traded – further highlights the need for international action to support alternatives to mercury mining in Kyrgyzstan.

With initial support of the Government of Switzerland and the United States of America, UNITAR and UNEP have assisted the Kyrgyz Government as they grapple with the complex issues related to the future of the mine. As you will see in this publication, the region of the country where the mine is situated faces long-term economic and environmental challenges that make the possible closure of the mine a contentious issue.

The international community has shown encouraging signs of support for the future of Khaidarkan – asking for options that can be considered for support should a decision to close the mine be firmly made by Kyrgyzstan. Should this decision be made, we all can therefore be more certain that a "win-win" – for the global environment and the local community of Khaidarkan – can be realized. More recent funding support from the Government of Norway has also been warmly welcomed.

We hope that this publication can provide a general overview of the issues at-hand. More information is available from UNEP, UNITAR and our supporting organization, the Zoï Environment Network.

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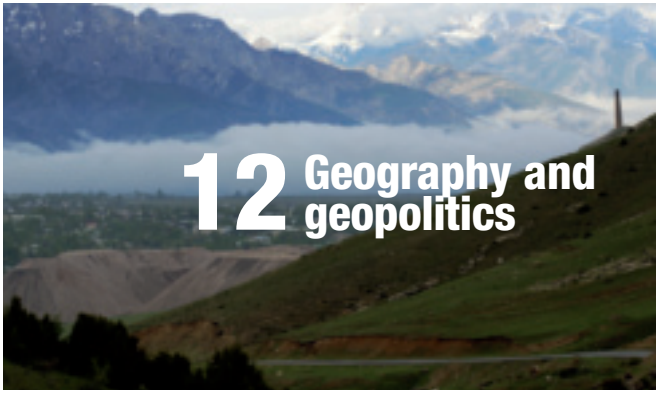
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Make mercury
history

Make mercury history

Mercury, to the Romans, was the messenger of the gods. Today's mercury is more prosaic: a planet, and also a metal, known sometimes as quicksilver. It was widely used in thermometers, scientific instruments (due to its unique chemicals properties), as well as many other products and processes. The use of mercury, however, is being reduced throughout the world due to its toxicity and the availability of substitutes. Certain forms of mercury and its compounds can damage neurological development and affect internal organs. Effects are most pronounced in pregnant women, infants and children. Mercury can spread far and wide through air and water: it is found as far from industrial centres as the Arctic. It is ingested by fish and other marine life, where it becomes concentrated as it moves up the food chain.

The world's governments agreed at the United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council in 2009 to prepare a legally binding instrument on mercury to protect human health and the environment from mercury. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee is to develop a comprehensive and suitable approach to mercury, including provisions to reduce the supply of mercury taking into account the circumstances of countries. Negotiations are to conclude in 2013.

There is now only one known mercury mine in the world which continues to sell its output abroad: Khaidarkan, in the remote mountains of southern Kyrgyzstan.

What will happen to the "kombinat" (the mine, smelter and all the associated installations are known together as "the kombinat"*) is still far from clear. For the international community, continuing mercury mining – business as usual, even if brought up to international standards – raises significant concerns. It is widely recognized in the international community that limiting mercury supply

*Combine (*Комбинат*, kombinat) was the Soviet bloc term for industrial business groups or conglomerates in the socialist countries. Examples include VEB Kombinat Robotron, an electronics manufacturer, and IFA, a manufacturer of vehicles, both in East Germany, or the Erdenet copper combine in Mongolia. (Source: Wikipedia)