

PRESS RELEASE (Sample)

Greens Slam Unilever's Substandard Mercury Clean-up in Kodaikanal – Urge TNPCB to suspend Clean-up pending Review of Clean Up standards

17 MARCH, 2010. CHENNAI – Prominent city-based conservationists and wildlifers today slammed Hindustan Unilever for proposing a substandard clean-up of mercury pollution at the latter's now-closed thermometer factory site atop the eco-sensitive Pambar Shola Reserve Forest in Kodaikanal. Alphonse Roy, a wildlife filmmaker and cinematographer, Shekar Dattatri, a filmmaker and conservationist, and Nanditha Krishna, honorary director of CPR Environmental Education Centre urged the Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board to suspend all remediation work in Kodaikanal, and take steps to ensure world-class clean up of the mercury pollution in Kodaikanal.

The demand is in response to a recent revelation that the TNPCB has authorised Hindustan Unilever to clean up to standards lower than were originally proposed by the company in 2002. In a letter to the TNPCB and to the Minister of Environment & Forests, Mr. Jairam Ramesh, the trio has pointed out that the dilution of standards was done on the basis of assessment of risk to human health, rather than to ecological integrity. “Given the known toxicity of mercury to soil microorganisms, the location of the factory site atop the Pambar Shola, and the known movement of subsurface and surface water from the factory site to Pambar Shola, we believe that this dilution of clean-up standard is ill-advised,” the letter states. Under the diluted standards, Hindustan Unilever will be allowed to leave behind more than 100 kg of mercury in the soil. This mercury can enter the food chain through surface and sub-surface water movement and affect downstream communities as far away as Madurai. Stating that the Pambar Shola ought to be declared a World Heritage Site owing to the mega-diversity contained within it, the trio underlined that clean-up of the factory site should

ensure that this national treasure is protected. Mercury is potentially toxic, and can hurt soil micro-organisms, particularly in soils rich in organic content. Further, mercury tends to convert to methyl mercury, a more lethal and bio-available form, which then enters the water system and builds up the food chain. Pambar Shola's soils are rich in organic matter, and the Shola is the birthplace of the Pambar River which joins the Vaigai.

Soil micro-organisms are essential to break up organic matter and release nutrients for higher flora and fauna in the ecosystem. "By attacking these micro-organisms, mercury can affect a keystone species and topple the entire ecosystem," the three environmentalists said in their letter to the Government.

They commended the TNPCB for having been proactive in the past in ensuring the export of mercury scrap from the factory to the United States. However, they said TNPCB should remain open and decisive, and ensure that clean-up to the highest standards happens with public participation. Speaking at a press conference organised by the CPR Environmental Education Centre, the three environmental experts expressed concern at the absence of independent assessment of the offsite and onsite contamination. The standards dilution has happened in a non-transparent manner amidst allegations of conflict of interest of the research agency (NEERI) that first proposed the downgradation of standards. NEERI is a consultant hired by Hindustan Unilever despite an express direction by a Supreme Court Committee that TNPCB, not HUL, should engage NEERI as project management consultant. It is difficult to repose confidence in the estimates of mercury contamination and clean-up standards based solely on data provided by the polluter or its consultants, the speakers said. They have asked for the constitution of a public oversight committee to monitor the assessment and clean up in Kodaikanal, and for hand-over of the site to the Forest Department after clean-up.

For more information, contact: (give number, email id etc)