



United Nations Environment Programme

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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT • PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

PRESS RELEASE

Dakar to host Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants from 30 April to 4 May

Talks on toxic chemicals to focus on DDT, technology transfer and environmental monitoring

Dakar, 30 April 2007 – Some 130 Governments are meeting at the Meridien Hotel this week to advance global efforts to rid the world of some of the most dangerous chemicals produced by humankind.

The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) targets 12 hazardous pesticides and industrial chemicals that can kill people, damage the nervous and immune systems, cause cancer and reproductive disorders and interfere with normal infant and child development.

“The risks that these chemicals present to farmers, pregnant women and other highly vulnerable groups have been judged unacceptable by the international community. The Dakar conference will help to accelerate the elimination of POPs not only in Africa but throughout the world,” said Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, which oversaw the adoption of the treaty.

A key issue on the conference agenda will be an evaluation of whether countries that use DDT to combat mosquitoes carrying the deadly malaria parasite need to continue doing so. While the Convention targets DDT for eventual elimination, it recognizes that some countries must still use this pesticide in order to protect the health of their citizens. Delegates will also consider establishing a business plan for engaging all stakeholders in an ambitious new push to find effective alternatives to DDT.

Another issue is how to strengthen the global monitoring network for tracking the levels of POPs in the environment and the effectiveness of the Convention in reducing these levels. A vital next step is establishing baseline data against which future measurements can be compared to see whether levels are indeed declining.

The meeting will also consider how to expand support to developing countries for cleaning up POPs in the environment, adopting alternatives to POPs that are safer for human health and the environment and otherwise meeting their treaty obligations. The discussion will focus on the need for regional centres to provide such practical assistance.

The 12 initial POPs covered by the Convention include nine pesticides (aldrin, chlordane, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene, mirex and toxaphene); two industrial chemicals (PCBs as well as hexachlorobenzene, also used as a pesticide); and the unintentional by-products, most importantly dioxins and furans.

Governments may add more chemicals to this list over the coming years; ten chemicals have already been proposed and are currently being evaluated. A decision on whether to include these chemicals in the Convention is expected to be made in 2009.

While the risk level varies from POP to POP, these chemicals all share four properties: they are highly toxic; they are stable and persistent, lasting for years or decades before degrading into less dangerous forms; they evaporate and travel long distances through the air and through water; and they accumulate in the fatty tissue of humans and wildlife.

Every human in the world carries traces of POPs in his or her body. POPs circulate globally through a process known as the "grasshopper effect". POPs released in one part of the world can, through a repeated process of evaporation and deposit, be transported through the atmosphere to regions far away from the original source.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to POPs. The problem has been that high costs, a lack of public awareness, and the absence of appropriate infrastructure and technology have often prevented the adoption of these alternatives. The selection of any alternative will depend on the specific target chemical, the properties and use patterns of that chemical and each country's climatic and socio-economic conditions.

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PRESS BACKGROUNDER

Health experts and environmentalists combine forces to reduce DDT while preventing malaria

Dakar, May 2007 – Health experts stress that DDT is important for killing and repelling malarial mosquitoes. The malaria parasite kills at least one million people a year, mostly children, and mainly in Africa – and it increasingly resists the drugs traditionally used for treatment.

Environmentalists point out that DDT harms wildlife, killing birds, for example, by thinning their eggs shells. This means that DDT, like other persistent organic pollutants (POPs), could also be causing chronic health problems in humans. Its widespread presence in breast milk, in particular, may be harming infants.

This dilemma will be addressed during the first week of May in Dakar when the member states of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) will once again evaluate the need for the continued use of DDT – which, together with 11 other POPs, is targeted for eventual elimination by the treaty.

Fortunately, the health and environment communities both agree that, while DDT will remain necessary for some time in some countries, it will be possible to gradually reduce its use by adopting more environmentally friendly alternatives. Most of these alternatives can be as effective – or, given malaria's still-high death toll – more effective in reducing, and one day eliminating, malaria.

“Adopting newly available approaches to malaria control can reduce the amount of DDT used every year without risking human lives,” said UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner. “However, unless more ambitious investments are made in finding better vaccines against the malaria parasite and better pesticides and methods to fight the mosquitoes that carry it, the complete elimination of DDT will not occur for many years.”

Every year, some 4,500 tonnes of DDT are sprayed in small quantities on the interior walls of homes as a relatively cheap and effective way of repelling and killing malarial mosquitoes, thus preventing them from biting people. No countries report using DDT to spray on crops anymore – hundreds of thousands of tonnes were once used every year in agriculture – but over 20 still use it for malaria control.

These nations are justifiably concerned that an over-quick banning of DDT could have a high price in human lives lost to malaria. The Convention therefore permits the production and use of DDT for controlling mosquitoes and other disease vectors in accordance with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and guidelines and when locally safe, effective, and affordable alternatives are not available. Use will be carefully regulated and monitored and must be publicly registered.

The Convention's member states, in consultation with WHO, are to evaluate at least every three years whether DDT is still needed for this purpose. Thus protection against malaria will not diminish – very important – and the use of DDT will probably become more safe and efficient as a natural response to increased scrutiny.

Moreover, researchers and environmental and health organizations will have a greater incentive to develop more alternative strategies for malaria control, hastening the day when DDT will no longer be such an essential part of the anti-malaria toolkit.

DDT is still used because it works and it is cheap. In contrast to the massive quantities once used in agriculture, DDT is sprayed on the inner walls of homes in relatively small amounts. However, given that mosquitoes do develop resistance to the chemical, there is a constant need to monitor such resistance and to ensure that both DDT and other insecticides continue to be effective.

But many countries that confront malaria have moved or are moving away from DDT. They are drawing on a set of integrated environmental and disease-management strategies. The reason is that DDT represents an old technology in the fight against malaria, effective in some instances, but not in others. Its use may also pose long-term health risks to the people it is meant to help.

In seeking alternative strategies, many countries have turned to Integrated Vector Management (IVM), which involves using a combination of techniques adapted to local circumstances. One is to choose from a list of 11 insecticides (DDT is the 12th) currently recommended by the WHO for indoor spraying. Others include using larvicides to kill mosquitoes before they mature and cleaning up puddles and old tyres and other insect breeding grounds.

Yet another IVM intervention involves the use of Insecticide Treated Nets (ITNs). These bed nets have proven themselves to be effective, especially since people receive most mosquito bites while they are sleeping. Long Lasting Insecticidal Nets containing an insecticide within the netting fibre have also recently been introduced. This technology allows the net to remain effective for four or five years.

While these and other initiatives are helping to limit the spread of malaria, there is still no global partnership for promoting a collaborative search for effective alternatives to DDT. A proposal on the table at the Dakar conference seeks to establish a business plan that would include input from all stakeholders – governments, industry, non-governmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations, donors and local community groups – on developing new methods and strategies to reduce the use of DDT while also cutting the incidence of malaria.