Press Release

Scientists 'should explain how chemicals affect our lives'

GENEVA, 11 May – A United Nations conference on how to manage the use of everyday chemicals has heard a call for scientists to tell politicians and the public more about the chemical risks they face.

The conference, ICCM2 - the second session of the International Conference on Chemicals Management - opened today, and runs till 15 May. Being the governing body of SAICM, the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, it has attracted about 800 participants from governments, industry and NGOs.

The Conference opened with a statement by one of the architects of SAICM, Viveka Bohn, Sweden's former Environment Ambassador. She said the meeting was an "opportunity for making a great leap towards a toxic-free future", and SAICM could "significantly reduce risks associated with the life-cycle of chemicals by 2020".

Viveka Bohn said it was increasingly urgent to manage chemicals in everyday products safely. To protect our children and future generations, the world needed a global strategy on knowledge and information. She said it was governments and industry which were clearly responsible for tackling the health and environment problems associated with chemicals. But she added: "Scientists have a key role to play in conveying and explaining to the public and to the politicians, clearly and objectively, the latest knowledge on the effects of exposure to chemicals, especially the 'cocktail' effect and the effects of unidentified transformation products."

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The cocktail effect is the ability of several chemicals in combination to have effects which cannot be predicted from their behaviour on their own. There is wide agreement that much more research is needed in this area**.**

Ms Bohn called for a global pooling of scientific research on chemicals. She said a UN panel could provide valuable help, and urged the conference to invite UNEP and the World Health Organisation to establish an international chemicals panel similar to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Climate itself was an issue whose links to chemical mismanagement should be stressed, she said.

She said it was unfortunate that the first ICCM meeting - in Dubai in 2006 - had not been able to reach agreement on the role of the World Bank in SAICM. Given the Bank's substantial role in financing chemicals-related programmes, she said, the conference should now invite it to play a decisive part in SAICM's work.

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Notes to Editors

Viveka Bohn was not able to travel to Geneva to speak at the conference: her statement was read for her by her daughter Maria.

Much of the conference is devoted to discussion of four emerging issues of concern – nanotechnology, electronic waste, lead in paint, and chemicals in everyday products. The notes below give a brief outline of why SAICM is concerned about them (more detailed briefings are available from the contacts listed above).

Nanotechnology

Nanotechnology (which operates at molecular and atomic levels, with extremely small substances and products) offers enormous gains: from portable filters that can purify water from a mud puddle, for example, and crystals which can remove arsenic contamination from wellwater, to sheets of metal foil that can turn homes and offices into miniature power stations,

Nanotechnology allowed his Chinese hosts in 2002 to present the then US President, George W. Bush, with a self-cleaning necktie. But there's the rub. Will nanotechnology be used to mimic the natural qualities of fibres like cotton and silk? If so, what could this mean for countries like Burkina Faso, 39% of whose exports are cotton?

Again, nanotech offers hope of cheap synthetic anti-malarial drugs, and compounds valuable in the fight against HIV/Aids. But critics fear that could undercut the proven protection already available from condoms.

Chemicals in Products

This category can sound a little puzzling. After all, every living being and inanimate object is made up of chemicals. Perhaps a simpler way of understanding it is as "chemicals in products where you might not expect to find them". We expect to find chemicals developed by humans in pesticides and pharmaceuticals, for example, but we may forget that they are also in tables, books and shoes. So

this is a global concern, with particularly vulnerable groups facing heightened risks. These can include children at all stages of development, including before birth. Sometimes the risks can be substantial, as with lead in jewellery and phthalates in plastics.

There is one key reason why chemicals in products may have been an overlooked problem. Historically, reducing chemical risks has concentrated on releases to air and water during manufacturing. But we now realise that dangerous substances may also be released from products during use, and at the end of their useful lives

Electronic Waste

This category is known also as e-waste or Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE). It comes from machines like fridges, air conditioners, microwave ovens, fluorescent light bulbs, washing machines, computers, mobile telephones, TVs and stereo equipment. The high rate of obsolescence in many of these means a fast turnover and a huge waste stream, much of which is exported from developed to developing countries, sometimes for further use as second-hand equipment and sometimes as end-of-life waste. E-waste has been identified as the world's fastest-growing waste stream, forecast soon to reach 50 m tonnes annually. It has already led to the premature grounding of large numbers of serviceable passenger aircraft, for example.

E-wastes contain persistent, bio-accumulative and hazardous (PBT) substances like heavy metals (lead, nickel, chromium, mercury) and organic pollutants like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and brominated flame retardants (BFRs). Many developing countries do not have the infrastructure to manage e-waste properly, or an effective regulatory framework. Nor do many people realise how dangerous the wastes can be.

As long ago as 2003 it was estimated there were 1.3 bn mobile 'phones in use across the globe, with the total predicted to double by 2006. By April 2008 the number had reached more than 3 bn - nearly one person in two worldwide. The International Telecommunication Union suggests Africa is the world's fastest-

growing mobile market, with subscribers increasing between 1998 and 2005 by 1,000%: in Nigeria the increase from 2000 to 2006 was 10,000%, a rate made possible partly by imports of second-hand mobiles from developed countries. But too often the argument that this trade is "building bridges over the digital divide" is used as an excuse to obscure and ignore the fact that these bridges double as toxic waste pipelines to some of the poorest communities and countries in the world.

Most developing countries have neither a well-established system for dealing with waste nor effective enforcement of regulations on hazardous waste management. Products are not labelled properly, and there is no system of communication to warn retailers, users and reprocesssors about hazards. The result is often burning in open dumps, backyard recycling, and disposal into surface water, threatening the health of millions of people who are unaware of the risks, and seriously damaging the environment. Published data has shown that levels of heavy metals and brominated flame retardants in e-waste imported into developing countries are far higher than threshold limits set in Europe and North America. The problem is so serious that it may prevent some countries reaching the Millennium Development Goals on water and sanitation by 2015. A major concern of developing countries is that when WEEE is mixed with EEE (electrical and economic equipment) the consignment is not shipped as waste, but as second-hand products, technically exempt from the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes.

Lead in Paint

No level of exposure to lead is considered safe. The poisonous properties of lead have been recognized since ancient times, and today it is recognized as one of the twenty leading risk factors contributing to the global burden of disease. Eliminating lead exposure from petrol has been one of the most significant environment health improvements in recent times.

Lead-containing products are however still widely made and sold across much of the developing world. It is very likely that most of the world's people live in countries where exposure to high lead levels in paint is frequent. Lead in paint is

the second largest source of exposure to lead following exposure from petrol. Paint containing lead is used in infrastructure like bridges, industry (car parts) and for marine uses, as well as domestically.

The evidence of neurological damage, especially to children (whose intelligence can be impaired) and to workers in the lead industry is beyond doubt. Adults can suffer renal and cardiovascular damage. Some studies suggest a link to behavioural problems as well. Lead damage is irreversible, and its effects appear to persist into adolescence and adulthood. House dust is the commonest way in which children are harmed by lead in paint. The lead remains a risk for many years after the paint has been used.

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