Press release
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Over 100 international health experts and toxicologists call for an end to the use of highly hazardous pesticides

Today, on the occasion of the launch of 4th International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM4) in Geneva, some 118 health professionals and toxicologists from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australasia and Europe have written to the heads of UNEP, FAO and WHO demanding an end to the use of highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs).

The open letter, addressed to UNEP Executive, Director Achim Steiner, FAO Director-General, José Graziano da Silva, and WHO Director General Margaret Chan, points out that HHPs pose a threat to human health and the environment and calls for an end to their production and use "…to protect our children and the succeeding generations from an impending toxic tragedy".

Signatories to the letter include professors of toxicology, epidemiology and doctors from all over the world.

The letter points out that official figures, which suggest that 200,000 people are killed by pesticides each year and that 25 million agricultural workers suffer from acute pesticide poisoning, are gross underestimates. It goes on to say that pesticides are used in over 33% of suicides worldwide.

The letter highlights the weaknesses of current pesticide regulation and risk assessment noting that "…there is unacceptable uncertainty in identifying safe levels to exposure to carcinogens, reproductive toxins, neurodevelopmental toxins and endocrine disruptors." And concludes that "The existing regulatory guidelines are insufficient for hazardous effects such as immunotoxicity, endocrine disruption and postnatal reproductive toxicity effects."

The solution to the problem, according to this group of international experts, is a global elimination of HHPs, ending their production and use.

"It is about time that the UN took action to end the sale and use of these toxic chemicals." Said Carina Weber, Director of PAN Germany. "They kill hundreds of thousands of people every year and cause immense pain and suffering"

"This letter should be a wake up call for the UN agencies charged with protecting our health and the environment." Said Dr Keith Tyrell, Director of PAN UK. "The signatories to this letter are internationally respected experts and they are saying we need action now."

"Every year, the pesticide industry makes billions of dollars from selling HHPs which cause death and misery. We know that there are safer alternatives out there that work. It is time for the UN to act to end the use of HHPs and support the adoption of safe and effective agro-ecological solutions." Said Sarojeni Rengam, Director of PAN Asia Pacific

"HHPs are a danger to both agricultural workers and people living near areas of application," Said Javier Souza, President of PAN International. "Some HHPs even have the potential to move through water, air, soil and end up in food thereby affecting people living outside agricultural areas. There are many effective agro-ecological alternatives to replace these poisons. We need to ban HHPs immediately"

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Notes for Editors:

At the ICCM4 meeting in Geneva, Sep 28- October 2, 2015, delegates can decide to take action on a request by the Africa region to formally establish a Global Alliance to Phase-out HHPs. PAN is co-organizing a side event with the global NGO network, IPEN, entitled "Closing the Gap on Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs): Agroecology & the Global Alliance to Phase-out HHPs.".

For more about PAN International and over 300 organizations that have joined the global call to ban highly hazardous pesticides and replace them with agroecological alternatives, visit http://pan-international.org/.

Pesticide Action Network (PAN) is a network of over 600 participating nongovernmental organizations, institutions and individuals in over 90 countries working to replace the use of hazardous pesticides with ecologically sound and socially just alternatives.

The full text of the letter is below

We, Toxicologists and Health Professionals, call for a global elimination of Highly Hazardous Pesticides

Many pesticides pose a threat to human health and the environment and result in heavy costs to societies. Due to their extensive use over a long period of time, highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs)[1] are now widely dispersed throughout ecosystems globally. Pesticides are found in human bodies and other living organisms, food and water, soil, and in the air.

Early statistics from the World Health Organisation (WHO) indicated that about 200,000 people were being killed worldwide and as many as 25 million agricultural workers in the developing world were suffering from occupational pesticide poisoning, every year.[2] In the decades since that estimate, surveys have indicated that occupational poisoning is increasing.[3] Official studies grossly underestimate these numbers. It is known that many children are poisoned by pesticides but there is no estimate of numbers.[4] UNEP's Global Chemical Outlook report points out that "Acute chemical poisoning data are highly variable and depend on the surveillance infrastructure in place in individual countries or regions".[5] WHO acknowledges that there are no reliable estimates of pesticide poisonings and that existing estimates likely significantly underestimate the global burden.[6][7]

A recent meta-analysis of worldwide literature on pesticide self-poisoning resulted in a conservative estimate of suicides by pesticides accounting for approximately 33% of suicides globally.[8] According to this WHO study restricting access to the means of suicide such as pesticides is a key element of suicide prevention efforts as pesticides are among the most common methods of suicide globally.

Further, Maximum Residue Limits, Acceptable Daily Intakes and Maximum Allowable Concentrations support a belief in "safe" levels of exposure that do not exist. Because of their inherent toxicity to humans and/or biological systems, the risks associated with HHPs cannot be managed safely, and thus 'risk management' approaches do not effectively prevent their disastrous effects on the health of humans and the environment, including the widespread disappearance of honeybees.[9]

Current risk assessment is largely based on the idea that "the dose makes the poison." However, recent advances in science have demonstrated that chronic exposure to low,

so-called “non-toxic” doses and to mixtures means there is unacceptable uncertainty in identifying safe levels to exposure to carcinogens, reproductive toxins, neurodevelopmental toxins and endocrine disruptors.

Existing regulatory guidelines are insufficient for hazardous effects such as immunotoxicity, endocrine disruption and postnatal reproductive toxicity effects.

There is growing evidence that the health of future generations may be severely jeopardized by HHPs. The foetus and the newborn child are sensitive to the harmful effects of many pesticides and other environmental contaminants, which may irreversibly influence their developmental processes.

Our understanding of the many ways in which chemicals can affect humans and the environment is still unfolding. For instance, our understanding of the fact that environmental chemicals can interfere with hormone action has developed slowly over the past half-century,[10] but is still insufficiently defined for regulatory systems to take appropriate action on them.

For the above reasons, it is ethically important for us, as concerned toxicologists and health professionals, to call for the immediate global elimination of HHPs. Their production, distribution and use must be stopped to protect our children and the succeeding generations from an impending toxic tragedy.

[1] For more on the definition and history of HHPs, please refer to the PAN International List of HHPs, available at http://pan-international.org/.The FAO/WHO Joing Meeting on Pesticide Management first used the term “HHPs”, and identified criteria for HHPs, which PAN since expanded to include important criteria missing from the JMPM definition, such as endocrine disrupting properties and inhalation toxicity.

[2]Jeyaratnam, J. (1990): Acute Pesticide Poisoning: A Major Global Health Problem. *World Health Statistics Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1990): 139–44.

[3]The figure of 25 million was based on an average of 3 percent of agricultural workers in low-income countries suffering one episode of pesticide poisoning per year. However recent surveys show that figure may be very much higher now, with, for example, acute occupational pesticide poisoning amongst young male Korean farmers reported to be 24.7%. [Lee WJ, Cha ES, Park J, Ko Y, Kim HJ, Kim J. (2012): Incidence of acute occupational pesticide poisoning among male farmers in South Korea. *Am J Ind Med* 55(9):799-807.]

[4] Watts M. (2013): Poisoning Our Furure: Children and Pesticides. Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific, Penang.

[5] Prüss-Ustün et al. (2011): Knowns and unknowns on burden of disease due to chemicals: a systematic review. Environmental Health 2011, 10:9. See also: United Nations Environment Programme (2015): *Global Chemicals Outlook Towards Sound Management of Chemicals*, p. 57. United Nations Pubns, 2015.

[6]Thundiyil, J.G., Stober, J., Besbelli, N., Pronczuk, J. (2008). Acute Pesticide Poisoning: A Proposed Classification Tool. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization.* Available from http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/3/07-041814/en/.

[7]Goldman. L. (2004). *Childhood Pesticide Poisoning: Information for Advocacy and Action*. United Nations Environment Programme and the World Health Organization. Available from http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/pestpoisoning.pdf

[8] WHO (2014): Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative. World Health Organization, Geneva.

[9] Some of the target sites of pesticides (proteins and enzymes) have been conserved throughout the evolution of species and can be found in very different organisms, for example humans, fruit flies, yeast and bacteria. Thus it is not surprising that some pesticides are toxic for non-target species.

[10]Endocrine Society (2015): Position Statement: Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals in the European Union.
http://www.endocrine.org/~/media/endosociety/Files/Advocacy%20and%20Outreach/Position%20Statements/2015/Position_Statement_EDC_EU.pdf