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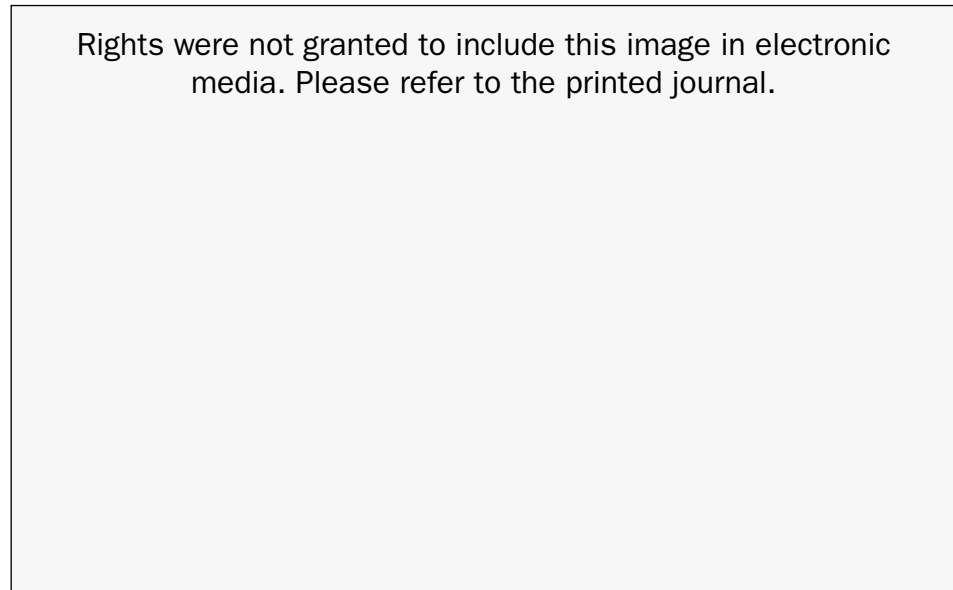
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## Concern over mercury pollution in India

A new report on mercury pollution in India has raised concerns over the possible health impact of mercury emissions in air, and contamination of groundwater due to mercury waste.

Releasing the report on Sept 18, Toxics Link, a non-governmental organisation based in New Delhi, said India imports over 250 metric tonnes of mercury each year and leaks more than 220 tonnes into the environment from known sources.

According to the report, chlor-alkali factories using outdated mercury cell processes cause widespread mercury pollution, leaking up to 150 tonnes of mercury every year. Government-owned thermal power plants follow closely, releasing an estimated 60 tonnes of mercury. "It is surprising that the government has set standards for all major industries which emit mercury, except coal-based



thermal power plants", noted Kishore Wankhade, the report's lead researcher.

Improper handling of broken thermometers in hospitals and homes is also a concern. India produces about 10–12 million thermometers and blood

pressure monitors every year. Waste such as mercury-laden glasses generated during manufacturing find their way into municipal dumps and drains. In 2001, Hindustan Lever's thermometer factory in Kodaikanal (Tamil Nadu, India) was found to have

dumped many tonnes of mercury waste in surrounding areas, and was ordered to close by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board.

Hospitals treat broken thermometers as medical waste and incinerate them, not realising that mercury emissions from incinerator stacks are getting into the environment, the report said. "There are safer alternatives like digital thermometers available, but high costs are preventing hospitals from using them", points out Anne Mathew (St Stephan's Hospital, New Delhi).

Mercury and its compounds bioaccumulate in the food chain—including in fish—and can cause severe neurological, physical, and kidney-based disorders. According to the report, high mercury concentrations have been found in groundwater, rivers, and in fish, as well as the blood of human beings.

"We found several cases of kidney failure and nervous breakdown among workers of the closed factory", said R K Singh, a member of the Indian People's Tribunal that investigated the health and environmental effect of the thermometer factory at Kodaikanal.

Dinesh C Sharma

Still Pictures

## More cash for health care in China

China has created a new CNY11 billion (US\$1.3 billion) fund to improve the country's health system in the wake of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, a senior government official announced on Sept 10.

The extra money will be used to establish hospitals specialising in infectious diseases and emergency treatment centres, according to Zhao Zilin, vice-director of the Planning and Finance Department at the Ministry of Health.

The funds will be disbursed over the next 3 years with CNY3 billion (US\$362 million) in treasury bonds already earmarked to start the programme.

Zilin made the announcement at a 2-day China Health Forum last week—one of several initiatives by the Chinese government to reassess the country's health-care system in the light of the problems exposed by SARS.

Zhao acknowledged that rural health-care institutions—particularly in the impoverished west of the country—have insufficient facilities and inadequately trained staff to deal with emergencies.

He also announced plans to set up a

network to improve reporting of disease outbreaks. This was in response to criticism about the lack of communication between research and treatment institutions. However, no mention was made of the political pressures that are widely believed to have led health authorities to initially attempt a cover-up of the outbreak. The mayor of Beijing and the health minister were fired when this became apparent.

China is preparing for the possibility of a fresh outbreak of SARS this winter. Hospitals across the nation have been told to establish emergency plans and many children are being inoculated against influenza to minimise the risk of being quarantined.

Last month, a team of experts from WHO recently visited Beijing and Guangdong province where SARS is believed to have started. However, they warned that they are a long way from identifying the source of the disease. Although a SARS-like virus has been found in civet cats, similar viruses have subsequently been discovered in a number of other animals, including snakes and birds.

Jonathan Watts