

## **MEDIA INFORMATION**

In the 2014 Environmental Toxin Report Green Cross Switzerland and the Blacksmith Institute are presenting the ten leading countries in the clean-up of contaminated sites:

### **Contamination is the major global health and environmental problem**

CH-Zurich, 28 January 2015 - Every year, around nine million people worldwide, most of them children, are dying as a result of environmental toxins. This is almost three times the number of fatalities caused by malaria and fourteen times more than caused by HIV/AIDS. Every year five million people lose their life in connection with climate change, significantly fewer than due to environmental toxins.

### **Sources of environmental toxins are underestimated global health risks**

The fact that more than one out of seven deaths worldwide is related to environmental toxins, however, offers just a glimpse of the enormous consequential health and economic costs resulting from the contamination of human habitats. Approximately 200 million people are suffering from frequently irreparable injuries to the body, including the brain, due to the exposure to lead, mercury, chromium, pesticides and radionuclides in thousands of contaminated places. Regardless of this magnitude and the severe consequences for humans, only a fraction of the financial investments and actions is spent on environmental contamination compared to the three global infectious diseases, malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, and the two environmental problems spanning the globe, climate change and the extinction of species.

"Environmental contamination, climate change and the threat to biodiversity are closely related, however", emphasises Nathalie Gysi of Green Cross Switzerland. "The reduction in environmental contamination and the clean-up of toxic sites not only leads to better health for people, it also improves the wellbeing of the natural eco-system in which we all live and on which we all depend. Nature's green infrastructure consisting of trees, plants and other organisms (the so-called biodiversity) provides us with oxygen and keeps air and water clean. It stems floods, limits the negative impact of droughts and, not least, it is a vital source of food and building materials. It is impossible to have healthy, functional wetlands or forests if they are exposed to high concentrations of heavy metals, toxic pesticides or radioactive waste.

### **The ten leading national clean-up projects of contaminated places in 2014**

Departing from the usual list of the ten worst polluted places by environmental toxins, the 2014 Environmental Toxin Report lists the ten leading countries in the clean-up of sites contaminated by lead, mercury, chromium, obsolete pesticides or radionuclides. The 2014 Environmental Toxin Report will be available for downloading at [www.greencross.ch](http://www.greencross.ch) on 28 January 2015, starting at 9 a.m. CEST.

(The top ten countries are listed alphabetically.)

- Ghana – Agbogbloshie – replacement of hazardous burning of electronic waste by mechanised recycling;
- Indonesia – Cinangka – successful clean-up of a lead-contaminated soccer field for children;
- Kyrgyzstan – Mailuu-Suu – use of water filters as protection against radioactivity;
- Mexico – Bicentennial Park – a green area instead of an oil refinery;
- Peru – new soil pollution laws and remediation timelines;
- Philippines - Marilao, Meycauayan and Obando river system – improvement of the water quality to protect people and the fishing industry;
- Former Soviet Union – collection and disposal of obsolete pesticides;

- Senegal – Thiaroye-sur-Mer – replacement of lethal lead recycling by profitable hydroponic gardens;
- Uruguay – Montevideo – elimination of toxic hot spots from a city neighbourhood;
- Vietnam – Dong Mai – \$ 20 per person to end lead poisoning of an entire village

"Regardless of the complexity, numerous obstacles and the lack of resources, it is always possible to bring about a change for the better in the most polluted places", says Richard Fuller, Founder of the Blacksmith Institute. "Every one of these projects is proof of how real the possibilities are in all countries to solve environmental problems caused by dangerous levels of toxic substances. All it takes to free people from the crippling clutches of environmental pollution is commitment, cooperation and compassion."

According to Stephan Robinson, Unit Manager (Legacy, Water), Green Cross Switzerland, local sources of environmental toxins may affect the health of people living thousands of kilometres away. "Due to the improper use and storage of pesticides and their production waste, up to 98 percent will seep into the ground and into the water. Today, traces of pesticides are found in virtually any body of water", explains Robinson.

### **Implementation of improved training and education initiatives**

The technology required to clean up contaminated sites and the pertaining professional know-how are already available. Portable detectors are capable of identifying contamination instantaneously. However, it is very rare that environmental contamination is considered to be a top priority.

The prevention of environmental pollution often goes hand-in-hand with the implementation of training and education in the use of better, cleaner technologies. Mining gold with simple mechanical means is believed to be the second largest source of mercury pollution in the world. Mercury, similar to lead, is a neurotoxin. Once it is in the environment, it will stay there forever. Toxin concentrations high enough to make consumption dangerous have even been found in fish and animals from Antarctica, although they were not directly exposed to mercury. The solution of the problem is to train mine workers in the use of gold mining technologies without mercury, which may also increase the yields at the same time.

Dong Mai is just one of thousands of Vietnamese villages with an informal underground production economy, housed in humble huts, and burdened for this very reason by a high level of toxic substances. Yet, a large part of the food they need is still grown by the people of these villages. The same is true in Thiaroye-sur-Mer in Senegal, which was massively contaminated by informal recycling of lead batteries. In what used to be one of the most polluted places on earth healthy children are now playing on their way to a more productive future. Environmental contamination is not a problem only experienced in cities. There are hundreds of thousands of villages in Asia, Africa and Latin America where unsuspecting children and adults are exposed to concentrations of environmental toxins that could have a significant detrimental effect on their health.

### **About the Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross Switzerland**

The Blacksmith Institute is an internationally operating non-profit organisation dedicated to solving life-threatening environmental problems in developing nations. The Institute is engaged in identifying and cleaning up the world's most polluted places and focuses on sites where women and children, in particular, are most at risk. The organisation is headquartered in New York and works with governments, the international community, NGOs and local agencies towards the development and implementation of innovative, cost-effective solutions to save lives. Since 1999 the Blacksmith Institute has completed over 50 projects and is currently involved in over 40 projects in 20 countries.

Green Cross Switzerland is dedicated to overcoming the consequential damages caused by industrial and military disasters and to cleaning up pollution from the Cold War era. A top priority is the improvement of the quality of life of people affected by chemical, radioactive and other kinds of contamination and the promotion of sustainable development in the spirit of cooperation instead of confrontation.

Green Cross International (GCI), established by Mikhail Gorbachev, is an independent, non-profit, non-government organisation acting through advocacy at the highest level and through local projects to overcome the interrelated global challenges of security, the fight against poverty and destruction of the environment. GCI is headquartered in Geneva and maintains a growing network of national organisations in over 30 countries.

*For additional information, please contact Dr. Stephan Robinson, Unit Manager (Legacy, Water) of Green Cross Switzerland, mobile phone +41 079 625 64 67.*