U.N. Unit Tells Danger Of Toxic Substances

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STOCKHOLM — In the face of grim verbal and visual evidence from Japan of what heavy metals and chlorinated hydrocarbons can do to human beings, a key committee of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment has approved a call to all nations to minimize the release of such substances into the environment.

While avoiding a judgment on the effects of supersonic air traffic on climate or health, it also voted yesterday to ask nations undertaking programs that might alter the climate to "carefully evaluate" the results. The fruits of such research would then be disseminated to the world "to the maximum extent feasible."

The latter qualification was inserted at the suggestion of the United States and approved by a small margin. However, the 112-nation committee considering these recommendations then agreed to the final text without dissent.

The committee, one of three considering the agenda items, met as the conference began its working sessions.

Changes Unlikely

While all decisions made in the committees must go before the final plenary sessions, representation in the plenary sessions will be the same, so changes are unlikely.

To underline the urgency of the recommendation on toxic substances, the Japanese presented a report on three types of poisoning that have struck their population.

One, as of February, had involved 1,021 people, of whom 16 have died. It was traced to the leakage of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) into rice bran oil, widely used in Japanese cooking.

Officials of the World Health Organization said this incident was the first indication that PCB can be fatal. Because the substance has been widely used in a variety of things, including paints, electric insulation and carbonless paper, and because it is not appetizing to bacteria, it has been accumulating in the environment.

One cause for concern is the strong chemical similarity of PCB to DDT, which is even more widespread but has not been shown, so far, to be a serious threat to human beings.

Japanese Disease

The Japanese also reported on the itai itai disease, which for many years puzzled physicians along the Jinzu River of Honshu Island.

The disease which causes the bones to become excruciatingly painful and break with even normal body movements, was finally traced in the late 1950, to cadmium poisoning.

For years the metal had been entering the river in effluent from a silver, lead and zinc mine upstream. The river water was used for irrigation and the metal had soaked into the soil of rice paddies.

Since the source of the disease was traced, 122 victims of the disease have been identified, of whom 22 have died.

The third and best known of the poisoning outbreaks was those eating fish and shellfish from Minamata Bay on Kyushu Island. Now known as Minamata disease, it has been traced to methyl mercury discharged by a chemical plant. As of March, 181 victims had been identified, of whom 52 had died.

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