

Issue. Officials say the country's fish exports risk being banned due to contamination from mercury being propagated by artesian miners.

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KAMPALA. The next time you buy fish from the market it might contain harmful traces of mercury, the environmental watchdog, National Environment Management Authority (Nema) has warned in a new report.

Artisanal gold mining and burning of coal to power cement factories are some of the activities that Nema says are responsible for almost 20,000Kgs of mercury that are released in the air, more than 3700Kgs dumped in the country's wetlands and lakes including Lake Victoria, and 4770Kgs in fields.

"The levels are too high. We must sensitise the public about the dangers of mercury use but also get alternatives," Nema deputy executive director Christine Akello said of the study titled: An inventory of mercury quantities and release estimates.

There are many products on the market that contain mercury such as dental amalgam, electrical appliances-switches and fluorescent lamps, laboratory and medical instruments-clinical thermometers and barometers and batteries.

Others are antiseptic and antibacterial creams and skin-lightening creams which are rampant on the market.

Mr Paul Mafabi, the director of environment in the ministry of Water and Environment, said the culture of

Govt fears fish export ban over pollution



Trade. Fish on a stall in a market. National Environment Management Authority has warned that fish might contain harmful traces of mercury released into water bodies. PHOTO BY ESTHER BRIDGET NAKAYA

disposing off of these mercury-containing products is poor and many Ugandans either burn them in the open or dump them in the environment including water bodies.

When these products are burnt, mercury ends up polluting the air and when dumped in water or land, fauna and flora are affected.

Through a process of amalgamation (crushing free gold particles

into contact with mercury), miners dissolve gold particles into mercury to gather gold including its smallest size.

Unfortunately, this separation is done in water and for the case of Namilyango Districts; the report says it is being done in Lake Victoria.

Wetlands and rivers in Mubende, Ibanda, Buhweju, Karamoja districts among others are also being

polluted by these artesian miners.

Due to pollution of lakes and rivers with mercury, fish and other aquatic animals end up ingesting mercury particles and in the end are ingested by humans when they eat fish.

Mr Mafabi, said the country's fish exports risk being banned due to contamination from mercury being propagated by artesian miners.

"Fish export ban has ever happened here [in 1990s]. That is why we need to look at development but also consider environment protection," Mr Mafabi said.

The ban

The European Union banned fish products because the fish was not "safe". Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries records show that fish exports to international markets rose from 4,751 tonnes worth \$5,308 (about Shs17.5 million) in 1991 to 36,616 tonnes valued at \$143,618 (about Shs486 million) in 2005 but have now declined to 17,597 tonnes valued at \$134,791 (about Shs444.8 million).

The World Health Organisation, says mercury exists in various forms including metallic; inorganic (chloride), and organic (methyl and ethyl mercury).

Whatever form it exists, mercury, according to the global health body, affects virtually all human systems including nervous, digestive and immune, lungs, kidneys, skin and eyes. And the world body says mercury has debilitating effects for unborn babies and children.

Uganda is yet to ratify the Minamata Convention on Mercury use, an international treaty designed to protect human health and the environment from anthropogenic emissions and releases of mercury and mercury compounds.