for a toxics-free future

October 2025

THE GLOBAL MERCURY TRADE

According to the most recent data available, in 2017, 1200 tonnes of mercury were legally traded globally. In 2022, five years after the Minamata Convention on Mercury took effect, 1700 tonnes of Hg were traded, a 40% increase in global mercury trade. While it is true that the mercury trade declined from 3500 tonnes[1] in 2013 (the year that the Convention was signed) to 1200 tonnes in 2017, most of this decline can be attributed to the phase-out of products and industrial processes using mercury, thereby reducing mercury demand. However, the record price of gold in recent years has reversed this trend.

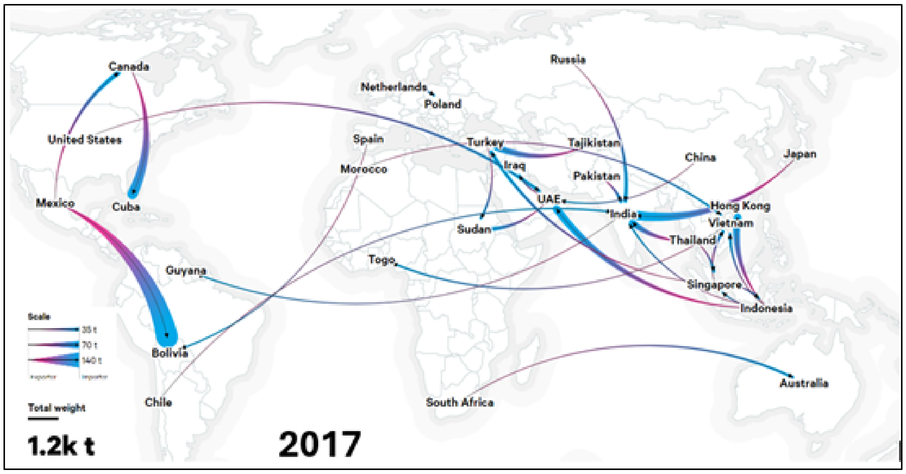

Figure 1 Legally traded mercury 2017 (1200 tonnes) Source Chatham House: Resourcetrade.earth

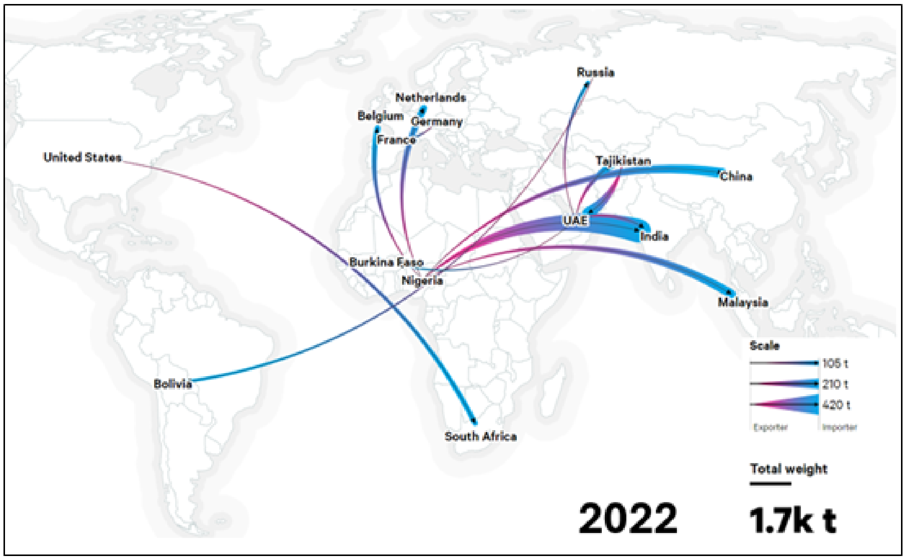

Figure 2 Legally traded mercury 2022 (1700 tonnes) Source Chatham House: Resourcetrade.earth

[1] https://resourcetrade.earth/?year=2013&category=1512&units=weight&autozoom=1

Despite most major industrial demand for mercury now being phased out, the mercury trade is rising steeply. Coincidentally, the price of gold has steadily increased since 2017 and has hit record highs beyond US $4000 per ounce, suggesting that ASGM has become the prime source of global mercury demand. This is supported by data from the Global Mercury Assessment 2018 indicating that the amount of mercury used in ASGM (legal and illegally sourced) in 2017 was estimated at **2059** tonnes. Five years later, the UNEP (2023) Draft Report on Mercury Trade, Supply and Demand[[2] estimated that around **2094** tonnes of mercury were used in ASGM.

While this shows a slight increase in mercury used in ASGM, the uncertainty in estimates suggests the amount of mercury used in ASGM has probably remained approximately the same, but has certainly not decreased. While the Minamata Convention on Mercury has resulted in significant reductions in mercury use in products and industrial processes, it has not been effective in the ASGM sector.

Amending the Minamata Convention to protect human health, human rights, and the environment

To achieve significant reductions in mercury use in ASGM, it will be necessary to amend the Convention to end the trade in mercury (which is currently permitted) and to establish a 2032 phase-out date for ASGM as an allowable use of mercury. This will need to be supported by a major effort by Parties and donors to roll out, at an industrial scale, mercury-free technologies and associated training to allow gold miners to maintain a livelihood without poisoning themselves and the food chain with mercury.

Reports from some Parties indicate that miners move more readily to mercury-free gold extraction methods when mercury is scarce and its price is high. Ending the global mercury trade will create conditions for both of these factors.

Main mercury exporters

In recent years, the main exporters of mercury to the global market are Tajikistan, Nigeria, United Arab Emirates, Mexico, and Russia with multiple destinations. While Mexico has not recorded commodity mercury exports in the last year or two, it has recently been demonstrated that large-scale illicit mercury mining[3] and smuggling have been occurring. The destination of this mercury is ASGM regions in Amazonian areas of Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil.

Free Riders

There are currently Non-parties to the Convention that continue to mine and supply the global market with mercury, benefitting as economic free riders. A global prohibition on the mercury trade will overcome this issue to a great extent, leaving only mercury trade between Non-parties, which have negligible ASGM activity. Parties to the Convention would not be permitted to import or export mercury except for the purpose of environmentally sound disposal.

[2] https://minamataconvention.org/sites/default/files/documents/other/Report_on_mercury_trade_supply_and_demand_DRAFT.pdf

[3] https://eia.org/report/traffickers-leave-no-stone-unturned/

Main mercury miners supplying the global trade

While China remains the highest primary miner of mercury, very little (if any) of its production is exported due to the mercury demand from China's Vinyl Chloride Monomer industry, which has been reported to use up to 800 tonnes of mercury annually. Tajikistan is consistently the largest primary miner of mercury that exports it as commodity. Notably, Indonesia and Mexico have been identified as countries in which illicit primary mining of mercury (as cinnabar) and refining to elemental mercury for smuggling is occurring at a large scale, although the actual volumes do not appear in global trade data.

World Mine Production and Reserves:

	Mine production		Reserves
	2023	2024	
United States	NA	NA	Quantitative estimates of reserves were not available. China, Kyrgyzstan, and Peru have the largest reserves.
China	1,000	1,000	
Kyrgyzstan	6	6	
Morocco	2	2	
Norway	20	20	
Peru (exports)	NA	30	
Tajikistan	100	100	
World total (rounded)	1,130	1,200	

Figure 3 Source U.S. Geological Survey, Mineral Commodity Summaries, January 2025
https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025-mercury.pdf

Trade in mercury compounds

The trade in mercury compounds, especially mercury sulphide or cinnabar, has largely been neglected by the Convention, which has instead been focused on elemental mercury. This has allowed the trade in cinnabar to grow without being subject to any of the trading restrictions in Article 3. Several parties have recently reported to the Secretariat that the trade in cinnabar specifically has been undermining the obectives of the Convention, as cinnabar can be readily distilled into elemental mercury at its destination. Cinnabar rock is being smuggled under loads of gravel labelled as "landscaping supplies" to avoid detection. As cinnabar releases very little mercury vapour until it is heated, it can often escape detection - even by advanced technologies such as a Lumex analyzer. At COP-6, Parties have been asked to consider this issue and IPEN advocates for a decision that ensures that the trade in cinnabar is restricted under the Convention and ultimately prohibited.

Figure 4 Typical cinnabar rock. Source: mineralexpert.org

IPEN recommendations

- Amend the Convention to prohibit the international trade in mercury by Parties.
- Restrict the trade in mercury compounds, especially cinnabar, to prevent it from undermining the Convention.
- Accelerate the closure of primary mercury mines from 2032 to 2027.

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