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To: The Chairman and members of The National Assembly
national and international environmental organizations
the people of Suriname
and all who cherish and respect nature

HONOURING GOD'S CREATION AND HUMAN HEALTH *The threat of mercury poisoning in our country*

Dear sisters and brothers,

Today we celebrate World Earth Day and I would like to take this occasion to focus on mercury poisoning in our country. God created this world especially for us, not only to live healthy lives but to take care of the environment for the well-being of His children from all future generations. He willed that the health of His people and that of the environment are intimately and inextricably linked to each other. We therefore honour Him by protecting the earth on which we live and the soil in which we grow our food, the water we drink, the rivers – home for all our fish – that provide us with sustenance, and the air we breathe. The earth on which we live keeps us alive, so we in turn must keep it alive.

In Suriname, the rich environment has always been an important source of employment and economic development. Mining (bauxite, oil, gold) and agriculture have been and continue to be important economic drivers providing work for many in our country. However, no matter how important these drivers may be, the exploitation of our natural wealth can never be at the expense of human well-being. Sadly, we witness that in our country and in many other developing nations, this human well-being is sacrificed for the sake of economic growth, which is not seldom driven by the demands of rich nations: *“In different ways, developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future,”* says Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si’*.¹

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health and wellbeing as *“a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”*² This is the state that God intends for His people and which He gave mankind in the beginning: *“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”*³ God places man in the Garden of Eden,⁴ which stands as a symbol for the state of complete human well-being and which God created good for mankind, but which is and

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, 52.

² World Health Organization, *The first ten years of the World Health Organization*, Geneva; 1958.

³ Genesis 1,31.

⁴ Genesis 2,15.

continues to be severely violated by mankind. Science has shown that where we live, play, and pray determines the quality of our health. Indeed, God gave us a rich environment but also made each one of us responsible to take of it, just as he takes care of us.

In his encyclical *Laudato si'* Pope Francis sums up some examples of how mankind violates God's good creation, thereby threatening human well-being: "*Underground water sources in many places are threatened by the pollution produced in certain mining, farming and industrial activities, especially in countries lacking adequate regulation or controls.*"⁵ In his encyclical, the Pope makes specific mention of mercury poisoning in gold mines and sulphur poisoning in copper mines, which are the result of the compelling desire to meet the demand for these metals.⁶ In our country, some goldmining activities are poisoning our environment and our health. Every year, up to twenty thousand (20,000) kilograms of mercury is estimated to be released into the environment, primarily through artisanal and small-scale gold mining. For every kilogram of gold produced, an equal amount of mercury is released into the environment. Approximately 55%⁷ of the mercury is taken up in the air and 45% deposited in rivers and creeks resulting in water, sediment, and fish contamination. What is taken up in the air eventually ends back on earth during rainy seasons, contaminating our soil and rivers.

Mercury poisons our environment and our families in the interior but also in our cities. For thousands of years we know that mercury can damage all organs in our body. The most vulnerable individuals are pregnant women, the unborn child and young children 0-4 years old. Mercury also poisons goldminers. Of special concern are the effects of mercury on the developing brain. Children poisoned with mercury are affected for the rest of their lives: they do not grow well and cannot learn well. Pregnant women who have no other source of food than mercury-poisoned fish not only poison themselves but also the unborn child.

In recent studies of the rivers and people who live near artisanal goldmining areas in the interior of Suriname, scientists found that the rivers are poisoned with mercury. Fish who live in those rivers are also poisoned with mercury and now mercury has been detected in pregnant women and children at levels of significant health concern: almost all (70-100%) women tested had mercury levels known to damage themselves and the brain of their unborn child. These and other horrific consequences from reckless gold mining – which are not unknown to policy makers – are regrettably on the rise. The inability or the refusal to monitor compliance with legislation in this field, places us for the immense peril that we are heading for a serious ecological, and above all human catastrophe.

We are also aware that in the interior of Suriname there are many individuals, families and even whole communities, for whom eco-tourism provides a good source of income: local, but more significantly foreign visitors, who are very attracted to the beauty of the rainforest in our country, which is considered by many as one of the last precious

⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ P. Ouboter, W Hawkins, and M Lichtveld. (2016), *Mercury pollution in Suriname – A threat to family health*, West Indian Medical Journal, 65 (Suppl 3), 43.

remains of virgin forests. These people not only enjoy the beauty of nature, but they also contribute to 'green' economic activities of the inhabitants in our interior. There now looms the threat that the increasing mercury pollution of our rivers and creeks will be cause for these visitors to abandon their plans to visit our interior, as a precaution to safeguard their own health. An important source of income for the inhabitants of the interior is therefore seriously threatened by mercury pollution. Moreover, it is very important that we are deeply aware that the rainforest on our Surinamese territory is part of the Amazon rainforest, which together with the Congo rainforest, is regarded universally as the 'lungs' of the earth. Protecting our rainforest is therefore both an obligation as well as a privilege, since we provide the whole of humanity with oxygen.

Jesus says: "*Let all children come to me.*" We all are responsible to make sure that God's children are healthy by protecting their environment. On earth day we must all honour the Creator by protecting the environment for his children today and for those of all future generations. This call is not only directed to Christians or other faithful, but to all people. Because as Pope Francis emphasizes: "*the simple fact of being human moves people to care for the environment of which they are a part.*"⁸ A great responsibility lies in the hands of those who have leading and decisive roles in political, economic and cultural spheres. But that does not relieve anyone of the care and the obligation for the protection of the environment, and consequently the protection of human well-being. "*Not everyone is called to engage directly in political life. Society is also enriched by a countless array of organizations which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment, whether natural or urban.*"⁹

The call of Pope Francis with his encyclical *Laudato si'*, that all of us are responsible to care for our common home – the earth – is more urgent than ever. I believe therefore that his encyclical is a welcome document for us in our fight to protect our earth, and I highly recommend it to all of you, as a guide for learning how to respect and cherish the environment.¹⁰

I wish to conclude my message for World Earth Day with the prayer of Pope Francis, that concludes his encyclical:

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and

⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁰ The encyclical of Pope Francis can be found on the internet in many languages. Some paragraphs, that are particularly relevant to Suriname, are: 14, 20 28, 29, 38, 51, 79, 93, 95, 112, 117, 139, 147 157, 159-162, 164, 167, 177, 183, 184, 189, 197, 200, 207, 210, 211, 223, 224 and 231.

contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace. Amen.

Paramaribo, April 22, 2017

+Karel Choennie
Bishop of Paramaribo