

South Against Genetic Engineering (SAGE)

GE-Bulletin (*September second fortnight*)

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1.# Court: 'withhold approval for genetically modified products'

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Friday asked the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee not to give approval for genetically modified products until further orders.

DDS was a co petitioner in this case along with Aruna Rodrigues and Devinder Sharma.

A Bench comprising Chief Justice Y.K. Sabharwal, Justice C.K. Thakker and Justice R.V. Raveendran gave this direction on an application filed by Aruna Rodrigues and three others seeking a ban on release of genetically modified organism/seeds having the potential of causing major health hazards.

Counsel Prashant Bhushan alleged that the Government's policy was to give speedy clearance for genetically modified organisms (GOM) even before putting in place a mechanism to test their bio-safety value. He pleaded for stay on grant of fresh approvals and on all field trials of genetically modified crops.

Involve experts

The Bench said: "We are not inclined to direct stoppage of all field trials at this stage without [knowing] the stand of the respondents.

At the same time, we deem it appropriate to direct the GEAC to withhold the approvals until further directions are issued on hearing all concerned. The Government would also consider associating independent experts in the field with the GEAC." It directed that the matter be listed after two weeks.

In their public interest litigation, the petitioners said GMO seeds were a pest-resistant, high producing variety with the inherent drawback of passing on strands of pesticide to human body that could in future blow up into major health problems. The hazards included new allergies, greatly increased resistance to antibiotics, and severe toxicity to humans, animals and micro-organisms, resulting in a serious import on human health, and loss of wildlife and biodiversity.

In a fresh application, they said genetic engineering, if allowed unchecked, would change the molecular structure of the world's food.

2.# US objects to import norms for GM products in India

The US has lodged a strong protest against India's recent foreign trade regulations on import of GM products and has asked the Government to suspend them immediately.

The regulations announced in March and in effect since July, require that all GM imports get prior approval by the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee, a panel set up by the Environment Ministry.

The procedure requires declaration of all GM imports and this has sent US complaining to the World Trade Organisation's Committee on Technical Barriers to Trade.

"It is important that India suspend implementation of the proposed measure until we have worked together to understand and address its trade implications," it has written in a letter of objection in May.

However, the detailed guidelines for the regulations are not ready yet and hence the GM import regulations are not in force. A response has been sent to this effect from the Commerce Ministry, officials said. It has assured the US that the final detailed guidelines will seek comments from all concerned before being finalised.

The guidelines were to come into force on July 8 but for the delay from the part of Health Ministry in finalising the labelling guidelines for GM food.

The US, in its letter forwarded through the WTO committee, has requested India to consider comments from WTO members in the context of its WTO obligations, ``in particular that any such measures should be least trade restrictive and based on sound science."

The main concerns expressed by the US regarding the need to get prior GEAC approval for all GM products include the scope of the foreign trade regulation. It has asked the Government to give a list of the products which will be subjected to GM scanning.

It has asked if the Indian regulatory authorities will implement a testing regime in relation to the import regulation and has asked who will make the required declarations of GM content, the manufacturer, exporter, or the importer.

"The import regulation appears to require GEAC approval on a shipment by shipment basis. The basis for requiring individual GEAC clearances for shipments of the same product is unclear, as the dossier of safety information would be identical for each shipment" the letter says.

"We are concerned that the regulation's requirements are vague, and may be unnecessarily burdensome and costly. Neither the scope of products covered nor the implementation procedures are clear," it further says.

www.business-standard.com

3.# Tainted GMO rice found in Netherlands, Belgium: EU

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - Two shipments of U.S. rice held in the Netherlands and Belgium have tested positive for a strain of unauthorized genetically modified (GMO) rice, the European Commission said on Thursday.

A Commission spokesman said the consignments had passed through the Dutch port of Rotterdam in August.

"The U.S authorities have been informed and we will follow up," the spokesman said.

<http://today.reuters.com>

4.# Update on LLRice601 Contamination

Since the official announcement in August by the US government that commercial long grain rice in the US has been contaminated by the unapproved GE rice variety LLRice601, the full impact of the incident is now being felt among farmers, importers and the food industry.

For farmers, the impact has been the fall in prices for their rice and they have filed lawsuits against Bayer which owns the patent to LLRice601, for their losses. After the announcement, the September rice-futures prices on the Chicago Board of Trade sank 14% to US\$8.47 a hundredweight. The prices farmers can expect for their rice dropped by more than \$1 per 100 pounds. For farmers in Arkansas and Missouri where rice paddies cover a large area and rice contribute billions of dollars to the economy, this does not bode well for their future.

The UK joined other European countries when it became another victim of the contamination. Friends of the Earth found traces of illegal GM rice in samples of rice from a supermarket. It has since taken the first step in mounting a legal challenge to the UK Food Standards Agency for its failure to take appropriate action to prevent illegal GM rice from being sold to the public. Meanwhile, major supermarket chains in Germany, Switzerland and Ireland have removed US rice from their stores while

France's main distributors have taken steps to assure consumers that all contaminated products, including packets of rice and cooked meals containing rice, had been recalled.

In light of this latest incident, the European Commission requested the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to examine the data from the company and the US in order to verify the safety of LLRICE601 and to assess whether these data are sufficient to allow a safety assessment to be carried out according to EU legislation.

The Scientific Panel on GMOs of EFSA concluded in a statement issued on 14 September that "the available data are not sufficient to allow the safety of LLRICE601 to be assessed in accordance with the EFSA guidance for risk assessment." However, it also said that consumption of imported long grain rice containing trace levels of LLRICE601 "is not likely to pose an imminent safety concern to humans or animals", but it was silent as to what the long term effects might be, or in the case that the contamination levels are higher.

www.biosafety-info.net

5.# Cape Town: Monsanto waits as state stalls decision on modified maize

Multinational seed giant Monsanto was battling to get government approval to launch a new variety of genetically modified maize, the company said yesterday.

The seed is a "stacked gene" variety that combines two genetically engineered traits: a built-in resistance to weedkiller and an insecticide.

Monsanto launched its stacked gene cotton in SA almost a year ago, ahead of the 2005-06 planting season. It said at the time that it had already applied for a permit to launch similarly engineered maize. Two years later, the application is still pending.

"It has big implications for us," said Monsanto's regional bio-technology regulatory manager, Wally Green.

The interdepartmental Executive Council for Genetically Modified Organisms, which has the power to approve or veto permits for field trials and commercial release of genetically modified crops, had yet to make a decision, he said.

It seemed concerns emanated solely from the environmental affairs and agriculture department. It had asked Monsanto to conduct an environmental impact assessment on the stacked gene maize but had not given reasons for the request, he said.

Monsanto has launched two varieties of genetically engineered maize in SA. Its YieldGard maize contains bacteria genes that kill maize borers, a widespread cotton pest. Its RoundupReady maize contains genes from another bacterium that make it resistant to the weed-killer glyphosate. YieldGard maize has been planted in SA since 1997 and RoundupReady maize since 2002.

The stacked gene maize had been produce with conventional breeding techniques, crossing the weedkiller resistant plant with one resistant to insects, said Green. "The

request (for an EIA) would make sense if these were new traits but all we've done is put them in the same plant."

More than half the maize planted in SA is genetically modified, says Monsanto. Both yellow and white varieties are grown. While most of the maize is eaten unprocessed, or used as an ingredient in food products, a small quantity is fed to livestock.

Dr Julian Jaftha, departmental director for genetic resource management, confirmed that authorities had yet to make a decision on Monsanto's permit application, but declined to comment further. The permit was on the next council meeting agenda, scheduled for October 4, he said.

<http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/economy.aspx?ID=BD4A276423>

6.# UN report slams India for farmer suicides

An UN report on the Extent of Chronic Hunger and Malnutrition has said that even though India has enough food to feed its one billion people, hunger and household-level food insecurity have increased since the latter half of the 1990s.

Expressing doubts over the government's claim that poverty fell across India from 36% to 26% between 1993-2000, Ziegler said there was considerable debate whether poverty had actually fallen or whether the drop was a result of changes in the data collected.

"One explanation may be that the assumed cost of a minimum food basket no longer reflects the real cost of food in India. Poverty remains concentrated in Bihar, UP, Orissa, MP, Maharashtra and Karnataka. In some states, feudalistic patterns of land ownership persist despite legal abolition and the Land Ceiling Act,"the report said.

Slamming India for the rising number of farmer suicides, the report said sustained economic growth in the 1990s made the country a more market oriented economy but did not benefit all Indians equally.

Middle and upper classes benefited from 'India Shining' but the poor suffered a decline in living standards. The focus on a more export oriented economy has seen a shift from subsistence to cash crops, reducing the cultivation of grains, pulses and millets for household consumption.

With cash crops requiring increasingly expensive inputs such as seeds and fertiliser, many farmers have been pushed heavily into debt explaining the increasing number of farmer suicides, nearly 10,000 by 2004.

The report also criticised India for changing Public Distribution System, the world's largest food-based safety net, from a universal system to a targeted one in 1997.

This created the paradox of huge excess stocks of foodgrain held with the FCI, adding to costs and therefore to the losses, leading to a substantially higher food subsidy.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2021582.cms>

7.# WHO irresponsible promoting DDT

Pesticide Action Network.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is being irresponsible promoting DDT, a harmful pesticide, according to the Pesticide Action Network Aotearoa and Safe Food Campaign. The two groups are urging the New Zealand Government to make representations to WHO condemning any increased reliance on a pesticide with proven damaging effects on humans and the environment. DDT was deregistered from the New Zealand market in 1989.

DDT is being vigorously promoted for malaria control by the controversial new head of WHO's global malaria programme, Dr. Arata Kochi. A broad coalition of health and toxics experts from several continents denounced the move at the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety in Budapest, Hungary, yesterday.

"Decades of scientific evidence counter the claims of DDT promoters that its use for malaria control is harmless", stated Dr Meriel Watts, Co-ordinator of Pesticide Action Network Aotearoa, currently at the forum in Budapest. "DDT has been linked with human reproductive disorders, including undescended testes, poor sperm quality, premature delivery, reduced infant birth weights and reduced breast milk production, as well as developmental delays and breast cancer."

"Increased use of DDT could well result in raised levels of the pesticide in foods coming into New Zealand", maintained Ms Alison White, Co-convenor of the Safe Food Campaign. "It would also add to the burden of toxins in our environment - something we don't need and we don't want. Promoting DDT also undermines the international agreement on limiting toxins, the Stockholm Convention."

As Henry Diouf of Pesticide Action Network Africa points out: "Malaria is a disease of poverty, and addressing poverty is the long term solution. In the short term, safer and more effective approaches like bed nets, rapid identification and treatment of malaria cases and local education about mosquito control are needed- not more DDT."

<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO0609/S00303.htm>

8.# Study: Chemicals found in everyday foods cause cancer, wild hormonal shifts

New Dutch research suggests that low levels of man-made chemicals in common foods such as bread, milk and butter could build up in the human body and cause harm.

Dutch research cited by WWF-UK (World Wildlife Fund) indicates that low levels of chemicals from the environment or food packaging can be present in foods in low levels. Some scientists believe that even low levels of such chemicals can accumulate in the body and cause health problems.

The Dutch scientists found low levels of flame retardants, pesticides, artificial fragrances, non-stick chemicals and phthalate chemicals from plastics in foods.

Research conducted at the London School of Pharmacy suggests that even low doses of such chemicals can combine over time to produce serious medical conditions.

Natural health advocate Mike Adams, author of "Grocery Warning," says certain chemicals used in food packaging have already started causing problems for humans and the environment. For example, fish throughout the Potomac River have been discovered in large numbers with both male and female sex organs, and Adams points out that human girls are now showing signs of puberty as young as 3 years old. Hormone-related cancers have skyrocketed in recent years, Adams says, largely because hormones in animals and humans have begun mimicking chemicals -- especially those that come from plastics.

Health authorities in the UK have said consumers and manufacturers should not be complacent about chemicals in their foods, but that further research is needed to determine how certain substances react with one another, as well as the products of those reactions.

<http://www.newstarget.com/020511.html>

9.# Press release- "Leave the trade talks on hold "

Friends of Earth.

Anti-poverty and environment campaigners are calling on world leaders not to restart world trade talks that could have a devastating impact on developing countries and the environment.

Friends of the Earth, War on Want and the World Development Movement (WDM) welcome the current suspension of the Doha Round of world trade talks, as it provides an unprecedented opportunity to consider alternative approaches to the failed model promoted by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its most powerful members. Yet instead of reflecting on these approaches, world leaders are attempting to revive the Doha Round and push an unfair trade deal upon poor countries.

The new trade talks are scheduled to take place in Cairns, Australia, on 20-22 September with around 50 countries set to attend. These talks are part of a push to revive the Doha Round and are expected to be followed by further efforts from the European Union in November.

Friends of the Earth Trade Campaigner Joe Zacune said:

"Any attempts at resuscitating trade talks are of real concern for poor communities in the South as the WTO has dramatically failed to produce a deal that would promote development for them. Instead, natural resources such as forests and fisheries have been slated for a corporate carve-up, infant industries looked set to be destroyed and millions of poor farmers faced further impoverishment. An alternative approach to the WTO's corporate-driven agenda is desperately needed."

John Hilary, Director of Campaigns and Policy at War on Want said:

"The world trade talks have done nothing to address the needs of the poorest countries, and no last minute deal will change that reality. The WTO should admit that its free market model has failed to deliver a development agenda and turn to alternative solutions instead. Rather than trying to revive the trade talks, the Doha Round should be allowed to rest in peace."

Benedict Southworth, Director of the World Development Movement said:

"The deal on the table is fundamentally flawed and cannot deliver the promised 'development round'. Even some further concessions from the US on subsidies cannot alter the overall anti-development nature of what is being proposed. Without a major shift in EU and US trade policy, and without a radical change to the way negotiations are conducted, there is little point in resuscitating the round."

The organisations said that world leaders have failed dramatically to put development at the heart of the Doha Round. According to a recent report by UNCTAD, developing countries were set to lose between \$32 and \$63 billion if current negotiating proposals had been accepted . Even the EU's own impact assessment published in May this year admitted that poorer countries stand to lose more than gain from the Doha Round, including the loss of vital tariff revenue.

http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/leave_the_trade_talsk_on_h_20092006.html

***Article:* Bt cotton - The bubble bursts**

By Devinder Sharma

Anil Khondwa Shinde was a cotton farmer in Bhadumari in Vidharba. Last week he swallowed pesticide and died within minutes. At 31, Shinde was not the only young farmer to have taken the fatal route to escape the continuing agrarian distress. Nearly 60 per cent of the farmers committing suicides happen to be less than 45 years in age.

Ironically, Shinde is a victim of the highly expensive and sophisticated improved technology. He had planted Bt Cotton, the genetically modified crop expected to reduce the application of pesticides and thereby improve profitability. He is not the only Bt cotton farmer to have ended his life, hundreds of Bt cotton farmers in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have killed themselves over the past few years.

In neighbouring China too, what was initially projected as a silver bullet has finally hit the dust. Seven years after Bt cotton was commercialised, a recent study by Cornell University and the Chinese Academy of Science have concluded that Chinese farmers are incurring losses due to a spurt in secondary pests. Farmers have to spray as many as 20 times to control the pests. Putting at rest the hype generated by agricultural scientists and seed companies often exhorting India to follow the example of China, the latest study only establishes what was known for long – in the name of higher productivity, cotton farmers are being literally fleeced by the companies.

Take the case of India. Bt cotton was also projected as a 'magic bullet'. Although I had warned time and again that the technology is not suitable for the non-irrigated areas (and much of cotton is grown in dryland regions), it was pushed nevertheless. Several studies have shown Bt cotton yields to be substantially lower than non-Bt varieties. Agricultural scientists had earlier projected a net increase in profit by Rs 10,000 per acre from growing Bt cotton without considering that the seed royalty in India was 700 times more than what was being collected in China. Let us not forget that the loss being incurred by Chinese farmers would have been much higher if they were also made to cough out a higher royalty fee.

As a result, while an increasing number of Bt cotton farmers are dying, the seed companies and dealer's profit continue to soar. Thanks to the marketing blitz launched by the seed companies – even using dancing girls to lure gullible farmers – the area under Bt cotton continues to multiply. And so are the profit margins for the companies. Between 2002-05, the seed companies had earned Rs 1,400-crore by way of royalty alone (they call it 'technology fee'). In 2006, the seed companies aim to pocket Rs 4,000-crore as royalty from farmers cultivating Bt cotton in 3.5 million hectares.

I have often said that if only this money had remained with farmers there would have been far less suicides. It only needed a government regulatory order to stop the royalties from being collected. With no price regulation, seed companies extracted an exorbitantly high royalty in India – Rs 1200 per acre compared to a paltry Rs 38 in China. Higher the seed cost, higher was the need for crop loans. At the same time, as I said earlier Bt cotton requires more water, which means more cost to pump out underground water. Fertiliser requirement also went up considerably. And with the crop harvest belying the promised yields, farmers found themselves in a terrible crisis – a victim of faulty technology.

As the New York Times reports "frustration is building in India with American multinational companies peddling costly, genetically modified seeds. They have made deep inroads in rural India - a vast and alluring market - bringing new opportunities but also new risks as Indian farmers pile up debt." Regardless of the extent of failure of Bt cotton, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) – the apex nodal agency that accords clearance for GM crops – has been merrily approving Bt cotton varieties. In the past four years, 59 Bt cotton varieties have been approved for commercial planting.

With the single-gene Bt cotton varieties failing to stand up to the promise, the GEAC is getting ready with the two-gene Bt cotton varieties. Without being first held accountable for the release of single-gene Bt cotton that forced hundreds of farmers to commit suicide, the GEAC is being allowed a free hand to play havoc with the future of the farming community. Such is the callous neglect that it continues to brush aside reports of 1,600 sheep dying in Andhra Pradesh reportedly from eating Bt cotton leaves. At the same time refuses to even take notice of reports of Bt cotton varieties causing skin allergies among cotton pickers in several parts of the country.

The question I am often asked is as to what is the alternative. My answer is very simple: Follow the two-pronged strategy. First, ban the use of chemical pesticides on cotton (which incidentally consumes 55 per cent of the total pesticides applied). This will result in a restoration of the ecological balance, minimise the insect attack, and result in a safer environment. Secondly, stop cultivating genetically modified cotton

varieties. Not only will it reduce drastically the cost of production, it will also mean that the farmer is pulled out from the death trap the companies have laid.

Farmers in several parts of the country are following this approach. In more than 4,500 hectares in Andhra Pradesh, farmers are reaping a higher harvest without growing Bt varieties or using pesticides. And there are no pests. A large number of farmers in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have taken the route to sustainable cotton production, and emerged free of the clutches of the seed and agribusiness companies. And if you are still not convinced, read what The Guardian has to say. Egypt government has announced its best-ever rice harvest. Farmers using conventional seeds grew a record average of 9.5 tonnes per hectare.

While cotton production in Egypt has picked up dramatically, government estimates in India point to a significant drop in cotton production this year and that too despite the area under Bt cotton expected to increase. Still worse, China – with the largest area under Bt cotton – is planning to import cotton from India this year. The Bt cotton bubble has surely burst.

<http://www.foodpolicy.in/portal/Articles/TodaysArticle/tabid/63/Default.aspx>
