

STOP PLAYING WITH HUNGER!

U.S. Genetically Modified food force-fed to developing countries

Sacramento, US, June 2003. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman has invited ministers from more than 180 nations to the Ministerial Conference and EXPO on Agricultural Science and Technology from June 23-25, 2003 in Sacramento, California. More than 100 Ministers from over 75 countries, mostly of them developing countries, have confirmed their attendance to the Ministerial.



The US Government is promoting GM crops as the primary solution to improving food security and solving hunger in developing countries. The US Administration and biotech corporations will be strongly promoting GM crops at the Ministerial. Friends of the Earth opposes the Bush administration position on this issue, and is calling on all Governments attending the Ministerial to challenge US and corporate pressure to accept and promote GM food. This paper exposes the problems around the shipment of US GM food aid to developing countries and the hypocrisy behind the US Government argument that GM crops are needed to solve hunger in Africa.

President Bush accuses Europe of undermining the fight against hunger in Africa

During the Southern Africa crisis in 2002, the United States (US) Government and World Food Programme (WFP) representatives presented Genetically Modified (GM) food aid often as the only solution to hunger. These organisations presented a scenario in which there was nothing but GM food available. This scenario has been proven incorrect, as other options were possible: large quantities of non-GM food were available to be used as food aid and, indeed, were provided by Japan, members of the European Union (EU) and other donor nations.

In May and June 2003 the issue of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in food aid faces renewed controversy. In the recently announced World Trade Organisation (WTO) case filed by the US against the EU, the US is again blaming the EU moratorium on GMOs as being the cause of African rejection of GM food aid.ⁱ President Bush said on the 21st of May that "European Governments should join, not hinder the great cause of ending hunger in Africa".ⁱⁱ The polemic has since increased after June reports that Sudan rejected US food aid that contained GM food. Republican Senator Dennis Hastert said that the Sudanese action "is the direct result of the European Union's ban on approving new biotech crops".ⁱⁱⁱ

A related serious concern over US policy on food aid and GMOs is the US AIDS spending legislation bill which was signed into law in late May. That bill includes an amendment on GMOs which ties AIDS assistance to acceptance of GM food aid.^{iv}

US increasing global pressure on GM food

In the past few years, the US Government has intensively pushed GM food, as commercial exports or as food aid into the developing world. WTO threats to countries wishing to impose bans or moratoria on GM crops, like Sri Lanka, Croatia and Bolivia, have been documented since 2001.^v

In May 2003 the pressure increased against what the US considers a major block in the pace towards global acceptance of GM food: the European Union. The US government announced May 13th that it is filing a World Trade Organization case against the European Union over its five year moratorium on approving agricultural biotech products along with Argentina, Canada and Egypt, and supported by nine other countries.^{vi}

“But in US eyes, the dispute is about more than just GM food exports to the EU. Officials say that even if the European market stays closed, they aim to send a clear signal to other countries not to impose similar restrictions. Similar thinking inspired a successful US WTO challenge in the late 1990s to the EU’s long-standing ban on sales of hormone-treated beef. Even though the EU has not removed its ban, no other WTO member has imposed one.”

Financial Times, Wednesday May 14, 2003.

But the US case at the WTO is also a message to countries all over the world. US officials say that the WTO case against the EU moratorium is aiming “to send a clear signal to other countries not to impose similar restrictions”.^{vii} The WTO challenge against the EU is another warning to those countries, which would like to consider rejecting GM food as commercial imports or via food aid in the future.

Since the US initiated the case on May 13th the coalition of countries initially supporting the US has become weaker. Egypt, El Salvador and Honduras will now not take part in the official WTO consultation. Canada has distanced itself from the US, requesting a separate consultation with the EU.

At the same time many of the countries originally supporting the US also have either enacted bans or moratoria for GMO products. There is a clear contradiction since on one side they are supporting a country which challenges a GMO moratorium, and on the other side they have moratoria or bans at home. Among those countries are New Zealand (moratorium on planting GMOs), Australia (regional bans), Peru (ban on GM crops) and El Salvador (ban on GM seeds). Brazil and India, both big agricultural countries, have also requested to take part in the consultations.^{viii}

Forcing acceptance of GM Food aid

In the context of the recently announced WTO case filed by the US against the EU, the US is blaming again the EU moratorium on GMOs as being the cause of Africa’s rejection of GM food aid. US Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick said: “This

dangerous effect of the EU's moratorium became painfully evident last fall when some famine-stricken African countries refused US food aid because of fabricated fears stoked by irresponsible rhetoric about food safety".^{ix}

The EU has strongly rejected those accusations. The European Commission qualified the US Decision as misguided and unnecessary and in a May 2003 response has shown the real motives of US policy behind its attacks: *"Food aid to starving populations should be about meeting the urgent humanitarian needs of those who are in need. It should not be about trying to advance the case for GM food abroad, or planting GM crops for export, or indeed finding outlets for domestic surplus, which is a regrettable [outcome] of the US food aid policy"*^x

Another element of serious concern appeared when the US passed legislation tying assistance on AIDS to acceptance of GMOs in May. The United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003 allows the US authorities to apply pressure on African states to accept GM food aid before releasing support for the AIDS/HIV and related illnesses alleviation programmes.^{xi} USAID implements programs on AIDS/HIV in more than 50 countries.^{xii} In January 2003 the Bush Administration announced the Emergency Plan for AIDS relief which would provide \$15 billion over five years.^{xiii} This initiative targets specifically the most affected 14 countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Several countries where GM food aid has been rejected due to concerns over GM food, like India and Zambia are also recipients of AIDS assistance.

The right to choose impaired

GMOs are being introduced too quickly and without adequate knowledge about their environmental, health and socioeconomic impacts. Friends of the Earth International, on the basis of the precautionary principle, supports the right of any country to impose a moratorium or ban on the introduction of GMOs into the environment and the food chain, until GMOs have been proven safe through comprehensive and independently conducted assessments.

In 2002 a food crisis affected many countries in Southern Africa, namely Angola, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland. After a few months some of them accepted food aid milled to at least avoid the prospect of accidental planting. Only Zambia decided to reject GM food aid as both grain and milled, citing health concerns as well.

African countries that decided to take a precautionary approach to GM food aid and that asked for non-GMO food aid were initially left with little choice. The US and even the WFP told them they should accept some GM content. The right to choose was clearly impaired. An unnamed US official even said that "beggars can't be choosers".^{xiv}

Global support for the right to choose what to eat

The WFP already operates on the principle that all governments have the right to choose to accept or reject GM food aid, and if accepted, to set terms for such food import.^{xv} That principle was not observed since alternatives were not initially provided by the WFP in Southern Africa. The WFP and USAID were aware of some countries refusing GM food

aid as early as 2000, but ignored that concern when they failed to offer an alternative and failed to inform recipient nations about the GM content in their shipments.

Other countries, and national and regional institutions have expressed their views in favor of the right to reject GM food aid. For example the EU has already expressed a clear position on this: "The European Commission believes that it is the legitimate right of developing countries' governments to fix their own level of protection and to take the decision they deem appropriate to prevent unintentional dissemination of GM seeds".^{xvi}

Non-EU Countries have also been very supportive of the principle of freedom of choice, among them Norway, Switzerland and Japan. Norway's Minister of Development strongly defended that right and was very critical of its undermining: "This principle should be real and not illusive. The current situation does not seem to provide countries with sufficient choice. In fact, if GM-food is offered in an emergency situation, and no other competitive alternatives are provided, neither in quantity nor in price, significant pressure will be the result when there is food scarcity".^{xvii}

In the same way, the Swiss FAO-Committee position paper on this issue establishes that each country should be able to define by itself its rules concerning the import of GMOs on the basis of the precautionary principle. The Swiss FAO-Committee is of the opinion, that those countries which are not able to do their own risk assessment should only receive GMO-free food aid.^{xviii}

Asian countries including Japan have also been respectful of the principle of freedom of choice and have sent financial resources for the purchase of non-GM food for those countries which made that choice.

GM food is not the solution to hunger

Presentation of GM food aid as the only solution to hunger comes primarily from the US, which is also aggressively marketing GM crops in developing countries.

Today it is widely recognized that GM crops are not the solution to hunger, and are not at all on the priority list of African and other developing countries. As the magazine *New Scientist* said during the food crisis in 2002: "The real causes of hunger in Africa are poverty, debt, a lack of infrastructure and the Western farm subsidies that make it difficult for African growers to compete in world markets. Today's GM crops will not ease any of these problems. They might even make them worse".^{xix}

The fact that the US gives priority to the promotion of GM crops in third world countries, rather than promoting solutions desired by recipient nations, is a major consequence of the economic interest of the multibillion dollar biotech industry in the US.

Food aid must serve the interests of Southern Countries

Friends of the Earth International is very concerned that GM food aid may be sent again to unwilling recipients. This situation will happen again unless the necessary mechanisms are put in place to guarantee changes in the food aid system. Therefore we are calling on WFP, USAID and other donor institutions to guarantee that food aid in future serves the interests of developing countries, is adequate to the cultural and social

schemes in those countries, and helps improve the food security and food sovereignty of the recipient countries in the short and long term.

Some principles for food aid

Pressure to accept food aid or face starvation should not happen again. US legislation to tie food aid, or financial aid for AIDS to the acceptance of GM food aid is immoral and unacceptable.

Friends of the Earth believes that donors (both countries and international institutions such as the WFP) should apply 5 principles, instead, when dealing with food aid:

1. Every country has the right to decide the type of food it wants to accept for its citizens, and alternatives should always be available. Third world countries should not be faced again with the dilemma of either accepting GM food aid or receiving nothing. At the same time countries that choose not to take GM food aid should not be penalized or punished. This principle should be adequately implemented and the alternatives should be real.
2. Food aid in cash should be increased, and local and regional purchases of food prioritized.
3. Each country should be informed and prior informed consent should be granted before GM aid is introduced.
4. Food aid, which consists, contains or may contain GMOs should be identified and labelled accordingly.
5. Assistance in the form of support for development of sustainable agricultural practices should be made a priority so that all nations can avoid food crises in the first place.

For more information read the Friends of the Earth International report "Playing with Hunger" at the following website: www.foei.org/publications/gmo

ⁱ Zoellick, R. May 14th. Transcript: USTR says WTO biotech ban case aims to quell fears.

ⁱⁱ The New York Times. 2003. Bush Steps Up Criticism of Europe's Ban on Genetic Foods. May 21st

ⁱⁱⁱ Environmental News Service. 2003. House Panel Slams EU for biotech Food ban. June 14.

^{iv} H.R.1298 United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003 passed the Senate on May 15th.

^v FoEI. December 2001. US and biotech corporations impose GMOs worldwide under WTO threats. <http://www.foeeurope.org/press/17.12.01.htm>

^{vi} Office of the US Trade Representative, US Department of Agriculture. May 13, 2003. US and Cooperating countries file WTO case against EU moratorium on biotech foods and crops. www.ustr.gov

^{vii} Financial Times, Wednesday May 14, 2003.

^{viii} Friends of the Earth International. 2003. GMO Trade war : EU urged to stand firm as US-led coalition starts to crumble. 18th of June. <http://www.foei.org>

^{ix} Zoellick, R. May 14th. Transcript: USTR says WTO biotech ban case aims to quell fears.

^x European Commission. May 2003. European Commission regrets US Decision to file WTO Case on GMOs as misguided and unnecessary.

^{xi} H.R.1298 United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003 passed the Senate on May 15th.

"(g) SENSE OF CONGRESS RELATING TO FOOD ASSISTANCE FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS-

(1) FINDINGS- Congress finds the following:

(C) Although the United States is willing to provide food assistance to these countries in need, a few of the countries object to part or all of the assistance because of fears of benign genetic modifications to the foods.

(2) SENSE OF CONGRESS- It is therefore the sense of Congress that United States food assistance should be accepted by countries with large populations of individuals infected or living with HIV/AIDS, particularly African countries, in order to help feed such individuals." (NB the "sense of Congress" is not mandatory)

To view full text of the bill Go to Congressional record: <http://thomas.loc.gov/r108/r108.html>, Click on Daily Digest, May 15, and afterwards click on Senate passed H.R.1298, United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act. Then click on the last version, Section 104a

^{xii} To view the list of countries USAID webpage: http://www.usaid.gov/pop_health/aids/Countries/index.html

^{xiii} The White house. January 29, 2003. Factsheet: The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS relief

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030129-1.html>

^{xiv} Starved for food, Zimbabwe rejects US biotech corn, Washington Post. 31st July 2002.

^{xv} WFP. 2002. WFP policy on donations of food derived from biotechnology. Policy issues: Executive Board, Third Regular Session, Rome, 21-25 October 2002. WFP/EB.3/2002/4C

^{xvi} European Commission. May 2003. European Commission regrets US Decision to file WTO Case on GMOs as misguided and unnecessary.

^{xvii} Hilde F. Jhohnson, Minister for International Development, Norway. Speech given the 5th February 2003 titled "Globalisation, food and freedom".

^{xviii} Swiss FAO-Committee position paper on GMO and food aid. March 2003. Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Switzerland.

^{xix} New Scientist. 2002. When Myths kill. 3 August 2002.