

# RED POR UNA AMERICA LATINA LIBRE DE TRANSGENICOS



Open letter on food aid and GMOs

## **OPEN LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME, THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, AND THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANISATION**

Don,t pressure hungry peoples to accept GM food aid

Johannesburg, 2 September 2002

We strongly criticise the US government,s unrelenting pressure on countries in Southern Africa to accept genetically modified (GM) food in the form of food aid and through credit assistance.

We also deplore the UN World Food Programme for failing to first ask the countries whether they would willingly accept GM food. If the countries are unwilling to do so, the WFP should have arranged for non-GM food

instead, which is available even in the US. Advanced informed agreement is the cornerstone of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and should be respected by UN agencies. The fact that countries and people require food assistance should not be a reason to deprive them of the choice to obtain non-GM food. The hungry have dignity and the human right to choose food they believe to be safe.

We are also extremely concerned that the UN World Health Organisation and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation have irresponsibly advised Southern African countries that GM food is „not likely to present human health risk‰ and that „these food may be eaten.

The WHO and FAO themselves have previously recognised the need for pre-market safety assessment on GM foods on a case-by-case basis. The FAO has also previously called for „a cautious case-by-case approach to determine the benefits and risks of each individual GMO‰ and to address the „legitimate concerns for the biosafety of each product and the process prior to its release.

The safety of GM food is unproven. On the contrary, there is sufficient scientific evidence to suggest it is unsafe. GM food can potentially give rise to a range of health problems, including: food allergies; chronic toxic effects; infections from bacteria that have developed resistance to antibiotics, rendering these infections untreatable; and possible ailments including cancers, some of which are yet difficult or impossible to predict because of the present state of risk assessment and food safety tests.

The issue of safety is highlighted by results of UK government-funded research, recently released, showing that GM DNA in food can survive in the gut of human subjects and transfer to gut bacteria . The most immediate hazard from such horizontal transfer of GM DNA is the transfer



of antibiotic resistance marker genes to pathogenic bacteria, making infections untreatable. Assumptions on alleged GM food safety are based on a limited range of experiments that do not take into account the specific situation of the people in developing countries.

Besides food safety concerns, planting GM crops can result in a range of serious environmental effects. There is fear that the GM food given as aid may end up planted in the fields. There is then a real risk of GM contamination by cross-pollination. This could endanger indigenous varieties and certified seeds alike, and destroy the livelihood of farmers, especially those dependent on exporting non-GM maize. This issue was highlighted by the discovery that indigenous maize landraces growing in remote regions of Mexico have been contaminated by GM maize. A report commissioned by the European Union has warned that GM contamination is unavoidable. It is thus irresponsible for the UN agencies concerned to downplay the unintentional introduction of GM maize varieties into Southern Africa as a result of plantings or spillage of whole kernel maize provided as food aid.

We are also very disappointed with the European Union for buckling under US pressure to misleadingly reassure Southern African governments of the safety of the GM maize varieties that are approved in the EU, despite serious scientific concerns over these approvals. No maize has been approved for food use through a full safety assessment procedure. Only one GM maize is grown commercially in the EU on very small acreage, and since 1998 the EU has not approved any further marketing application for GMOs. The markets in the EU are effectively closed to GMOs due to consumer resistance.

We support the position of the Zambian government on this issue, which has taken a strong stand, with the support of its people and following a national consultation process, to reject GM food aid. This decision was taken based on the precautionary principle; in the absence of national biosafety regulations and adequate capacity to carry out reliable risk assessments; in the absence of evidence of safety to human health; and taking into consideration the threat of contamination to indigenous seed varieties. The decision was also taken to protect Zambian agriculture production and prospects for exports.

The Zambian policy decision is fully in line with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which enshrines the sovereign right of countries to be informed of, and to take precautionary decisions on, imports of GMOs.

Measures are being taken by the Zambian government to ensure that adequate food is available and accessible through arrangements with the private sector and food reserves. A number of countries including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, China and India have already offered assistance to Zambia to supply non-GM maize.

The US is not even providing food aid directly to Zambia. It is providing US\$ 51 million credit for the private sector in Zambia to import maize from the US. Sources of non-GM maize are available in the US, despite its claims otherwise.

The Zambian government is being forced into a difficult position. Zambia

requires international assistance to provide food to all its people, and is exercising its sovereign right to refuse GM food. Sources of non-GM maize exist and should be made available by the WFP and bilateral donors. Yet the US and the UN agencies are putting pressure on Zambia to accept GM maize.

Over 140 African civil society representatives and organisations from 26 countries to date have voiced their support of the Zambian and Zimbabwean governments for rejecting GM contaminated food, which has been rejected in Northern countries and which is now being dumped on African countries as food aid. They are also enraged by the emotional blackmail of vulnerable people in need.

We therefore make the following call and recommendations:

1. The US should respect the wishes of countries requesting food aid, and provide non-GM food to countries that do not want to receive GM food.
2. The WFP should withdraw its position of pressuring food-receiving countries to accept GM food. It should return stocks of GM food to the donor countries and instead urge them to substitute non-GM food for the GM food already given. In future, the WFP should only accept non-GM food for food aid.
3. The WHO and FAO should change their policy of assuring receiving countries that GM food is safe. They should at least be „neutral%00 and in fact should advise donor countries to respect the wishes of recipient countries and provide non-GM food.

Third World Network, Malaysia; Consumers, Association of Penang, Malaysia; Friends of the Earth Malaysia; KONPHALINDO, Indonesia; Tebtebba Foundation, Philippines; Accion Ecologica, Ecuador; Amigransa, Venezuela; Institute of Science in Society, UK; ECOROPA - Europe; Edmonds Institute, USA

