

FORCE-FEEDING THE WORLD

America's 'GM or Death' ultimatum to Africa reveals the depravity of its GM marketing policy

Zambia has been told by the USA to use \$50 million to buy America's GM maize through the World Food Programme or face starvation. When The US tried to force GM food aid on India an unnamed USAID spokesman told the media "beggars can't be choosers".¹

Robert Vint, UK Coordinator of Genetic Food Alert, investigates.

In 1998 Monsanto sent an appeal to all Africa's Heads of State, entitled 'Let The Harvest Begin',² which called upon them to endorse GM crops. Monsanto were following the advice of the world's leading PR company to avoid the 'killing fields' of health and environmental issues in the GM debate, such as the absence of independent safety testing, and to shift the debate to focus on supposed benefits for the poor. Western 'greens' should be singled out for demonisation for preventing biotech corporations from 'feeding the world'.

Ministers in Western governments have been bombarded with propaganda calling upon them to ignore the 'selfish' objections of their own citizens - consumers, health advocates, environmentalists and food retailers - because this technology was the only hope for the world's poor. American TV audiences have seen hundreds of adverts depicting smiling well-fed Third World farmers joyfully growing GM crops. None of this propaganda is based on fact and, significantly, none of it originates from the nations that would supposedly benefit from this technology.

Monsanto's letter-writing exercise could well have been the most catastrophic PR stunt in history. In response the Food and Agriculture representative of every African nation (except South Africa) signed a joint statement called 'Let Nature's Harvest Continue' that utterly condemns Monsanto's policy. It stated: "*[We] strongly object that the image of the poor and hungry from our countries is being used by giant multinational corporations to push a technology that is neither safe, environmentally friendly, nor economically beneficial to us*",³ "*we think it will destroy the diversity, the local knowledge and the sustainable agricultural systems that our farmers have developed for millenia, and that it will thus undermine our capacity to feed ourselves*".²

Since that memorable occasion four years ago none of these African nations have accepted GM food or crops. The situation is no better for Monsanto in other parts of the Global South.

Europeans were told that their insistence on labelling and regulation of GM food and crops would restrict the development of a technology desperately needed by the poor. But no poor nation was to be heard making such claims. What are we to make of the claims when dozens of poor nations themselves decide to regulate, label or ban these products? And how sincere does American concern for the poor appear when their Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick, responds by threatening these nations with sanctions? Such threats are numerous:

* America's treatment of **Sri Lanka** is one of the most shameful examples of its coercive policies. Sri Lanka's Health Ministry banned GM imports for a year on 1st May 2000, because of the untested nature of GM foods, and renewed this ban on 1st May 2001 after the discovery of imported chocolates, oils and soups containing GMOs. Within ten days the US began to use the WTO to threaten sanctions. As a result the new import ban was postponed to 1st September 2001, but the President sent a 'strongly worded' letter to President Bush to demand that the US stopped dumping untested GM foods in his country. US threats continued and by August peasant groups across Asia were protesting about them. Hundreds of letters of solidarity were sent to the Sri Lankan Government. On the 14th August a petition from 200 organisations demanding an end to US threats was presented the Bush Government. "Sri Lanka should not be subject to oversight or punitive action by the WTO because of its efforts to protect its citizens from the unknown risks posed by genetically modified organisms," the groups said in their letter to U.S. Trade Representative

Robert Zoellick. These appeals were ignored and on 3rd September Sri Lanka surrendered to threats from the US backed up by its ally Australia.³

* **Mexico's** Senate unanimously backed GM food labelling in November 2000. Within three months the USA was threatening to impose sanctions via NAFTA - the North American Free Trade Area - unless the decision was reversed.⁴

* The Secretary-General of the **Thai** Food and Drug Administration revealed in July 2001 that a US trade delegation had threatened to impose trade sanctions on Thailand if proposals to label GM foods were approved.⁵

* **China** introduced GM food labels and documentation requirements for GM imports in May 2001. By October Ann Veneman, US Agriculture Secretary (and previously Director of a Monsanto subsidiary), was objecting to the inspection of imports of US GM soya. By March 2002 China had been forced to 'temporarily' abandon its inspections and to allow unregulated imports of US GM soya.

* Similar sanctions threats have also been issued by the USA against wealthier nations such as **Canada** (March 2002 in response to plans to introduce labelling), **Argentina** (Monsanto Warns Argentina to Loosen GE Crop Restrictions April 2002) and the entire **European Union** (for labelling GM food and for regulating GM crops)

These acts of diplomatic terrorism by the USA may be objectionable but some of the steps it has taken to force acceptance of GM food and crops by these nations are more extreme. America reasoned that if no-one else wanted the crops then at least starving nations would accept them. As one USAID spokesman said "*beggars can't be choosers*". America is now the majority stakeholder in the World Food Programme, which it uses to facilitate the dumping of its crop surpluses, so it was not difficult to ensure that its unsellable GM crops ended up in virtually all WFP aid packages. But America is finding that it cannot even give its GM crops away:

* In March 2000 The Independent (UK) reported on growing protests in an article entitled 'America finds ready market for GM food -- the hungry'. It stated that '*Aid is the last unregulated export market open to US farmers as worried European and Asian consumers shun GM grain and introduce strict import and labelling rules*' and reported on protests by the **Malaysia**-based Third World Network and by **Ethiopia's** Dr Tewelde Gebre Egziabher who, on behalf of an alliance of Third World nations, stated "*Countries in the grip of a crisis.. ..should not be faced with a dilemma between allowing a million people to starve to death and allowing their genetic pool to be polluted*".⁶ A report by Food First (USA) written around this time concluded: "*The US food aid system appears to disregard the rights and concerns of recipient citizens in order to assure profits for US agribusiness giants. It is a system that allows for the misspending of public funds in ways that benefit the private sector; a system that takes advantage of the lack of regulation concerning the genetic engineering of food; and a system that undermines democratic decision making about food consumption*".⁷

* In the **Philippines** in April 2000 the nation's main farmers union, the KMP, protested about USAID dumping unsellable GM food on the country via the WFP. Rafael Mariano, chair of the KMP, condemned the deal, saying "*The US Department of Agriculture does not conceal the true objectives of the program. It shamelessly describes the 'Food for Peace' as a 'concessional sales program to promote exports of US agricultural commodities'*".⁸ **South Africa's** Biowatch joined in the protests, stating "*Africa is treated as the dustbin of the world. To donate untested food and seed to Africa is not an act of kindness but an attempt to lure Africa into further dependence on foreign aid*".⁸

* In June that year cyclone-hit Orissa, **India**, was the unknowing recipient of unlabelled and illegal GM food aid from the US. India's Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology detected the dumping, condemned it as a hidden subsidy for America's biotech industry and issued a declaration calling for a ban on the practice.⁹

* The Association of **Burundi** Consumers (ABUCO) and other organisations wrote to President Clinton in September 2000 to protest about dumping of unlabelled maize in Burundi and to ask why food exported to Europe was labelled but food aid to Africa was not.¹⁰

* In January 2001 **Bosnian** officials rejected 40,000 tonnes of GM animal feed provided as aid by the US.¹¹

* **Ecuador** halted imports of World Food Programme aid for poor children in May 2001 after the children held protests outside the WFP offices.¹² The food was from the USA and 55% of the ingredients were GM so making it illegal in Ecuador.¹³

* Later, in April 2001, **Bolivians** were furious to discover that their food aid from the USA contained high levels of GM soya and cornmeal - which were illegal under Bolivian law. US Ambassador Manuel Rocha, ignoring the regulations, told Bolivia that "if they didn't like genetically engineered food, they should think twice about ever visiting the US because that is what we offer to visitors."¹⁴ Tests of Bolivian food aid in 2002 have revealed Star Link corn and other varieties banned in the EU.

* In May 2001 tests arranged by Colombia Consumers (COCO) of **Colombian** food aid supplied to the National Program of Food and Nutrition Program revealed that the soya was an incredible 90% genetically modified.¹⁵

* In June 2000 **Guatemalans** protested about the presence of GM corn in imported aid for drought-hit peasants,¹⁶ while eight leading **Nicaraguan** organisations made similar complaints about the activities of the WFP and USAID after food samples tested positive for GM. A US Embassy spokesperson said emphatically, *"We are not using genetically-altered seeds. Neither USAID nor any other agency is promoting or financing the distribution of such seeds within Nicaragua."* Representatives of the World Food Programme also issued 'denials' which on close reading did not deny anything.¹⁷

* In the last few months America's controlling stake in the World Food Programme has given it the power to exploit Africa's crisis by offering its 'GM or Death' ultimatum to **Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique**. It is only because the US can prevent the WFP from purchasing available non-GM food from Southern nations that it able to tell these nations that they must buy GM maize, that they must buy it from the US and that it must be unmilled.

Financially, this aid primarily benefits the US biotech industry rather than the poor. The US offered Zambia \$50 million (the annual sum the biotech industry spends on TV ads) on strict condition that it only be spent on GM maize from the USA. India has vast surplus stocks of rice - 65 times as much as Africa needs - that would be available at half the cost of the US maize, but Zambia is forbidden to buy this with the money. Similar conditions were imposed on Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique and Malawi. Zambia's response marks the death of the 'feeding the world' PR strategy. Referring to the maize, President Levy Mwanawasa said *"if it is not fit then we would rather starve"*¹⁸ - and the national paper added *"If the US insists on imposing this genetically modified maize on our people, we will be justified in questioning their motive"*.¹⁸

In a region devastated by HIV/AIDS, where much of the population have deficient immune systems, where bacterial diseases are widespread and where outdated antibiotics are in widespread use there are sound medical reasons to reject crops containing genes for antibiotic resistance. This is the very reason for which they have been rejected in Europe.¹⁹

Monsanto and its Government cronies are desperate for real television footage of starving Africans gratefully eating GM food - so desperate that they would allow millions to starve if they fail. But independent experts agree that agricultural biotechnology is, at best, irrelevant to famine prevention.

American GM agricultural systems are irrelevant to poor and famine-stricken nations. US farms employ under 2 million farmers yet will require in 2002 a subsidy of over 20 thousand million dollars. This subsidy does not help American family farms, most of which face bankruptcy, but it does provide an essential indirect subsidy to the biotech corporations. Poorer nations cannot support agricultural systems that are so capital-intensive and that employ so few.

Indian food and trade policy analyst, Devinder Sharma, says: *"Somehow, biotechnologists prefer to turn a blind eye to the ground realities, missing the realities from the commercial interests of the biotechnology industries. In their over-enthusiasm to promote an expensive technology at the cost of the poor, they have forgotten that biotechnology has the potential to further the great divide between the haves and have-nots.. .. Biotechnology will, in reality, push more people in the hunger trap. With public attention and resources being diverted from the ground realities, hunger will only grow in the years to come"*.²⁰ Ethiopia's Food and Agriculture spokesman, Tewolde Egziabher, agrees, adding *"this notion that genetically engineered crops will save developing countries misses the real point. The world has never grown as much food per capita as it is doing now, yet the world has also never had as many hungry. The problem is not the amount of food produced, but how it is both produced and distributed. For example, farmers in developing countries who buy genetically*

engineered seeds that cannot reproduce--and so can't be saved and used for next year's crop--become tied to transnational companies like Monsanto".²¹

A Christian Aid report states "*GM crops are taking us down a dangerous farm track creating classic preconditions for hunger and famine*"²², whilst an ActionAid statement concludes "*The use and patenting of GM food and farming technologies in developing countries could have extremely serious economic implications.. ..the worst off are likely to be the poorest farmers.. ..this may ultimately lead to the very poorest leaving farming altogether, exacerbating the shift to cities and increasing urban poverty*".²³

Even Steve Smith, Director of biotech corporation Novartis (now Syngenta), admitted in 2000 that "*If anyone tells you that GM is going to feed the world, tell them that it is not. To feed the world takes political and financial will*".²⁴

There is no *global* shortage of food, nor is there likely to be one in the near future. Europe and America destroy surplus crops each year - but so do some of the poorest nations. The problem is not production but distribution. During every famine the affected nation exports food. Millions of people - including many farm labourers - are now too poor to buy the crops grown in their own nations - or even on the land they work. They starve while much of the world's food crops are bought by the West to feed cattle, pigs and chickens - and while much of the farmland is used, as required by the IMF, to grow cotton, coffee, tobacco and flowers for export. The millions of tons of surplus Indian rice that the Zambians are forbidden to buy is rotting in warehouses because the poor of India cannot afford to buy it. Malawi, too, had non-GM surpluses until a few months ago, but was required by the World Bank to sell them to service its debt.

GM crops can do nothing to address the true causes of famine. Inasmuch as they benefit wealthy farmers - who can afford the GM seeds and the chemicals that must be used with them - at the expense of smallholders, GM crops actually exacerbate the inequality that causes famine. Exported GM cash crops, such as Bt cotton and 'controlled-ripening' coffee, will not feed the poor - nor will profits from them go to the poor to enable them to buy food.

GM 'controlled-ripening' coffee, being developed in the USA, does away with the need for coffee-pickers - so threatening with unemployment (and therefore malnutrition) up to 60 million destitute coffee-pickers in over 50 nations.²⁵

The 'Vision 2020' development project in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India, will involve the clearance of 20 million cotton growers and other smallholders from the land to make way for vast automated plantations of GM cotton. The wealthiest landlords will profit whilst millions of refugees will face starvation.²⁶

A handful of biotech corporations, such as Monsanto, now have virtual monopoly control of agricultural seed and chemical sales in many Southern nations - making the food security of these nations vulnerable to stock-market fluctuations. The corporations have the power to buy up any local seed company and thereby remove traditional seed varieties from the market. To ensure a continuing market for their products they are determined to destroy the traditional practice of saving seed from one harvest for planting in the next season. If farmers use their own seeds they will not buy from corporations. To prevent this practice the companies already give priority to the marketing of F1 hybrids - plants that produce sterile offspring. But even more desirable for them are 'terminator crops' - seeds genetically modified to ensure that they grow into sterile crops - and 'traitor crops' - crops genetically modified so that they fail to grow or ripen unless sprayed with a chemical bought from the same company. Only when the biotech companies have monopolised the seed industry and forced Third World nations to accept GM crops will they be able to universalise Terminator and Traitor crops and so permanently trap Third World farmers.

Through the 'GM or Death' aid policy it may be possible to force the poor to eat GM food but it still seems difficult to force poor nations to plant GM crops. The most effective technique is to ensure that they are planted without consent. Several nations have discovered that GM seeds have been illegally sold to farmers without their consent - sometimes GM seed has deliberately been marketed as conventional seed, often conventional seed supplies contain suspiciously high levels of GM contamination and, finally, GM seeds provided as food aid have been accidentally planted by farmers. This seems to be the cause of the widespread GM contamination of maize in Mexico, where GM varieties are banned.

Deliberate contamination through food aid neatly complements America's strategy of forcing GM food down the throats of the starving. Having successfully contaminated Mexico, America hopes to repeat the exercise across southern Africa. America has made it very clear to the African nations obliged to receive its aid that it will only provide whole kernels of maize and will not mill them to prevent them from growing. They know that wealthy farmers in these nations, desperate to

obtain seed corn for next year's crop, will be able to pay more for this corn than will the starving poor. Once GM crops are illegally growing throughout southern Africa, America reasons, how will they be able to ban these crops?

GM crops have no future. The people of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and Latin America refuse to eat them. Farmers in India,²⁷ Brazil²⁸ and the Philippines²⁹ are burning and destroying them. The people of America are blissfully unaware of their existence - but, when asked, 93% want GM food labelled and most would try to avoid it. In response the share values of Monsanto are crashing. The US is on the verge of a GM trade war with the rest of the world. Now the principal marketing strategy of the biotech industry, refined over the years, has descended into blatant terrorism that threatens the food security of dozens of nations and the lives of millions.

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THIRD WORLD NETWORK www.twinside.org.sg/bio.htm

PEOPLES CARAVAN 2000 www.poptel.org.uk/panap/caravan.htm

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www.geneticsforum.org.uk/delusion.pdf

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www.genewatch.org/Publications/Briefs/Brief3.htm

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