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U.N. to seek agreement on access to seed banks

By David Brough

ROME, June 22 (Reuters) - Talks at the United Nations world food body next week will seek agreement on access to public seed banks, which could affect the ability of scientists to develop new crops to feed the hungry.

The meeting of the Commission for Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, part of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, will bring together representatives of 161 nations seeking to conserve the world's genetic resources.

A main focus of the meeting, which runs from June 25-30, will be to reach agreement on how life science companies and plant breeders should pay for resources kept at the world's public seed banks.

Public seed banks lend out crop seeds at no charge to enable plant breeders and geneticists to develop new crop varieties, which could improve yields to tackle hunger and increase resistance to global warming.

"The meeting aims to facilitate access by plant scientists to seeds," Jose Esquinas-Alcazar, Secretary of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, told Reuters on Friday. "There should be an equitable sharing of the benefits derived from genetic resources," he said. Until now, seed exchanges have operated informally on the principle of "common heritage" -- an agreement that they are a shared international resource.

However, change has been forced by the UN. Convention for Biological Diversity, which made nations responsible for their own genetic resources. Representatives at the meeting will discuss payment options for access to public seed banks, such as royalties paid into a central fund.

PROTECTING GENETIC RESOURCES

Esquinas-Alcazar said a main aim of the meeting was to protect the inherited components of biodiversity, which were dwindling fast. "Records show that more than 7,000 species of plants have been used by mankind since agriculture started more than 10,000 years ago," he said. "Today there are just 120 cultivated crops. Only 12 of these provide for more than 80 percent of our food, and only four -- rice, maize, potatoes and wheat -- represent 60 percent of our food," he added, Esquinas-Alcazar said more than 90 percent of the agricultural diversity that existed at the beginning of the 20th century had been lost.

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Green Groups Say Seed Patents Menace Food Security

Updated: Mon, Jun 25 11:07 AM EDT

By David Brough

ROME (Reuters) - Environment groups said on Monday the patenting of food and seeds by multinational companies threatened food security and access by

farmers to vital genetic resources.

"Seeds should be owned by people. They should not be owned by multinational

companies," Henk Hobbelink of Genetics Resources Action International (GRAIN) told a news conference organized by the Greenpeace group.

Greenpeace spokesman Christoph Then said, "If we don't stop companies getting those patents, world food security will be in the control of those

multinationals."

He added, "There should be no patents in seeds and food. It should not be

possible to get exclusive rights on world food security."

A meeting of the Commission for Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture,

part of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in Rome this week

brings together representatives of 161 countries seeking to conserve the world's genetic resources.

The meeting aims to establish a comprehensive system for the management and

sharing of inherited biodiversity.

OPEN ACCESS

The environmentalists urged the meeting to agree on an international undertaking that incorporated open access by farmers and plant breeders to

genetic resources.

The current practice whereby multinationals patented seeds and foodstuffs

in Europe and the United States threatened food production by ensnaring farmers, they said.

"We need more support...for a patent-free zone for plant genetic resources," said Then. "Civil society wants control of its own resources."

Blessing Butaammocho, a representative of smallholder farmers in southern

Africa, said multinationals could hold poor farmers to ransom by forcing them to pay dearly for seeds.

"Now many poor farmers get their seeds from family and friends," he said.

"If they had to get patented seeds from multinationals, they would have to

pay much more."

He added, "Patents restrict access to seeds for food production by smallholder farmers. Farmers' access to their own food would be restricted."

The environmentalists urged the meeting, which continues until Saturday, to

agree on ways to protect the inherited components of biodiversity, which are dwindling fast.

More than 90 percent of the agricultural diversity that existed at the beginning of the 20th century had been lost, FAO officials said.

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Official: Seed Patents Needed to Boost Research

By David Brough

ROME (Reuters) - Seed patents, which some critics attack as harmful to poor farmers, are a vital incentive for research and a means of encouraging plant diversity, a life sciences industry official said on Tuesday.

"We are strongly in favor of an intellectual property regime for the food and seed industry, because if you don't have strong intellectual property rights, you won't have incentives for research," said Patrick Heffer, scientific coordinator of the International Association of Plant Breeders (ASSINSEL).

"We consider both plant breeders' rights and patent laws necessary to have sufficient incentives to create new varieties of plants and promote food security," he told Reuters.

Heffer, based in Nyon, Switzerland, was a leading industry representative at a meeting in Rome this week of the Commission for Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, part of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

ASSINSEL represents plant breeders in 31 nations, as well as life sciences multinationals such as Monsanto, DuPont and Syngenta.

The meeting, which brings together representatives of 161 countries seeking to conserve the world's genetic resources, aims to establish a comprehensive system for the management and sharing of inherited biodiversity. The event ends on Saturday.

Heffer's remarks conflicted with the views of several environmentalist groups, including Greenpeace, who argue that patenting of food and seeds by multinational companies threatens food security and access by farmers to genetic resources.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS URGE OPEN ACCESS

The environmentalists have urged the meeting to agree on an international undertaking that incorporates open access by farmers and plant breeders to genetic resources.

"We would prefer to have no agreement than a bad one," Heffer said, declining to predict the outcome of the meeting.

The talks at FAO will seek agreement on access to public seed banks, which could affect the ability of scientists to develop new crops to feed the hungry.

A main focus of the event will be to reach agreement on how life science companies and plant breeders should pay for resources kept at the world's public seeds banks.

Public seed banks lend out crop seeds at no charge to enable plant breeders and geneticists to develop new crop varieties, which could improve yields and increase resistance to disease and global warming.

Heffer rejected arguments that poor farmers would be held to ransom by multinationals charging for patented seeds.

He said that countries could introduce exemptions into their intellectual property laws to protect farmers.

"You could have provisions exempting farmers from paying intellectual property rights," he said.

It was not the role of the Rome meeting, however, to incorporate an exemptions system into an international agreement, he added.

A document circulated at the conference said agricultural biodiversity was being lost at an alarmingly increased rate.

"It is estimated that some 10,000 species have been used for human food and agriculture," said the paper authored by Jose Esquinas-Alcazar, secretary of the FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

"Currently no more than 120 cultivated species provide 90 percent of human food supplied by plants, and 12 plant species and five animal species alone provide more than 70 percent of all human food," it added.

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