

GM crops The desperation grows

11 June 2003 | News



Accusing Europe of undercutting efforts to feed starving Africans by blocking the use of genetically modified crops which could "dramatically" boost productivity, the American administration fired the first missile by formally announcing to launch a complaint with the WTO against the European Union for its five-year ban on approving new biotech crops. This has set the stage for an international showdown over an increasingly controversial issue.

"Our partners in Europe are impeding this effort. They have blocked all new biocrops because of unfounded, unscientific fears," Bush said. "This has caused many African nations to avoid investing in biotechnologies for fear that their products will be shut out of European markets. European governments should join â€" not hinder â€" the great cause of ending hunger in Africa."

image not found or type unknown

The US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick added that the European policy is illegal, harmed the American economy, stunted the growth of the biotech industry and contributed to increased starvation in the developing world.

Coinciding with the frontal attack through the dispute panel is another seemingly harmless exercise to close ranks around flawed economic policies. Senior officials of the WTO-IMF-World Bank met at Geneva in May to deliberate on how to bring greater 'coherence' in their policies through 'liberalization of trade and financial flows, deregulation, privatization and budget austerity'. As if loan conditions of the IMF/World Bank that have forced developing countries to lower their trade barriers, cut subsidies for their domestic food producers and eliminate safety nets for rural agriculture were not enough, the WTO Agreement on Agriculture could be used very effectively to allow America and 12 other food exporting countries to dump unwanted genetically altered foods thereby destroying food self-sufficiency in developing countries and expand the markets for large grain exporting companies.

Trade and financial manipulations alone are not enough. Already with the mainline science and that includes the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) under the captive control of the corporate world, the industry is now getting restless at the way the developing country governments are throwing in impediments in the fast-track destruction of food self-sufficiency. After all, as long as developing countries remain self-sufficient, GM crops will not have an opening. The focus therefore is not on how to strengthen the food self-sufficiency movement in the developing world but on how to make these countries become dependant on the GM food produced in the technology-rich countries.

Mounting food subsidy and the resulting dumping of grains has already forced millions of small and marginal farmers in the developing world to be driven out of agriculture to move to the urban slums in search of a menial living. Highly subsidized agriculture in America and for that matter in the OECD is the root cause for growing hunger, destitution and poverty in the majority world. GM foods, produced by the biotechnology corporations, will further exacerbate the food crisis eliminating in the process not hunger but the hungry.

Ironically, it is famine, hunger and the accompanying lies that has become the normal campaign route to push unwanted and highly risky genetically altered crops and foods. In India where hunger co-exists with over-flowing food stocks, the entire scientific community (and the industry) is busy diverting the national attention from the more pressing problem of food insecurity to promoting biotechnology. Unwanted crops like Bt cotton and GM Mustard are therefore being promoted by hoodwinking the gullible farmers with lies and damn lies. The secretary of the Department of Biotechnology has gone on record saying that Bt cotton increases the yield by as much as 80 percent. She has even said recently that GM potato (which is still under trials) will contain 40 percent protein.

In reality, Bt cotton does not increase crop yield (not even in China which has a huge area under the genetically modified crops and where the negative impacts have begun to show) and GM potato contains only about 2.5 percent proteins.

At the international level, the global offensive is being built around coercion. Therefore, three ministers from 180 countries and holding the portfolios of trade, agriculture and health will assemble at downtown Sacramento in California on June 23-25. The invitation which comes from the US Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman is essentially for educating (in reality, intimidating) these democratically elected representatives on the virtues of GM foods and why they must back the US transnational corporations fight against global hunger. If not then why they must remain quiet. Ann Veneman will explain the 'consequences' both economic and political of not accepting the fruits of 'cutting-edge' technology, as genetic engineering is fondly called.

The overt and covert machinations to push unhealthy and risky GM foods had actually begun a decade ago. The US has so far opposed the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety which has been signed by over 100 countries and was intended to ensure, through agreed international rules and regulations, that countries have the necessary information to make informed choices about GM foods and crops. With the WTO appearing on the scene, the Cartagena Protocol has become meaningless. Since the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has not been ratified by the US, it is not under any obligation to follow the Biosafety protocol.

At the same time agricultural research which has been instrumental in ushering in food self-sufficiency in many of the developing countries in the post-green revolution era is being gradually dismantled. The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) itself is under tremendous pressure from the agri-business corporations which sees it as the main obstacle in the process of control and manipulation. With research priorities shifting from national requirements to servicing the biotechnology industry, like in India, it will be a matter of time before developing countries begin to return to the

frightening days of 'ship-to-mouth' existence.

Even food aid is being used to push GM foods. It is no longer about humanitarian needs of starving populations but about the commercial interests of the transnational corporations. First finding an outlet for its mounting food surplus through the mid-day meal scheme for African children (force fed through the World Food Program), the US then literally arm-twisted four African countries to accept GM food at the height of the food scarcity that prevailed in central and southern Africa in 2002. It even tried forcing the International Federation of Red Cross to lift the GM food as part of an international emergency so as to feed the hungry in Africa.

It didn't however work. Zambia and Zimbabwe led the resistance against GM foods saying that it would prefer its poor to die than to feed them with unhealthy food. As long as developing countries remain self-sufficient, GM crops

will not have an opening. The US has therefore found a way out to circumvent and to force the African countries into submission. The US Senate has passed a bill in mid-May entitled "the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Act of 2003," (HR 1298) which in a diplomatic way (calling it as 'sense of Congress') links financial aid for combating HIV/AIDS with GM food acceptance. Section 104A states that "individuals infected with HIV have higher nutritional requirements than individuals who are not infected with HIV, particularly with respect to the need for proteins. Also there is evidence to suggest that the full benefit of the therapy to treat HIV/AIDS may not be achieved in individuals who are malnourished, particularly in pregnant and lactating women." The next sentence reads, "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." The underlying objective is very clear: the US can use the verdict to stop humanitarian aid for HIV/AIDS unless the recipient countries first buy GM food. Killing two birds with one stone, you have probably forgotten that saying.

This is not an isolated effort. Way back, in 1986, the US had similarly enacted a legislation, called Bumper's Amendment, that prohibited "agricultural development activities, consultation, publication, conference or training in connection with the growth and production in a foreign country of an agricultural commodity for export which would compete with a similar commodity grown or produced in the US." As a result the American support for research and development for crops which competed with those grown in the US were stopped. With national research programs closing down for paucity of funds, the field is now open for the biotech industry to take over.

For pushing GM crops another outlet has now been created. The Rockefeller Foundation, in collaboration with the US-based Madison Institute, has launched a project called the 'Madison Initiative'. Under the guise of humanitarian aid and support the 'Madison Initiative' is aimed at pushing GM crops to tide over the increasing food insecurity arising from the growing vulnerability of HIV/AIDS affected economies. The basic premise being that HIV/AIDS has taken a heavy toll of able-bodied rural males in most parts of Africa. As a result, there is not enough manpower left in the rural areas to undertake agricultural operations like spraying of pesticides. Therefore, these countries must accept GM crops like Bt corn which they say require less chemical sprays!

This 'wonderful' initiative is being executed by CGIAR as an active partner. Such was the desperation that agricultural scientists had met former President Moi of Kenya who had agreed to officially support the 'Madison Initiative' subsequently to be extended to other Africa countries, including South Africa, and then to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand and to other parts of Southeast Asia, to push their case.

Never in the past history has any government stepped in to force the world and that too literally down the throat into accepting what it produces. Never before has the world been forced to accept technologies (howsoever risky these might be) and that includes nuclear power, in the name of poor, hungry and sustainable development. Never before has any country tried to force feed a hungry continent by creating a false scenario of an impending famine which never happened. Never before has science and technology been sacrificed in such a shameful manner for the sake of commercial growth and profits.

The world has been made to forget the age-old Chinese adage, "if you want to feed a man for a day give him fish. But if you want to feed him for life teach him how to catch fish." The ability to catch fish or in other words to produce food locally has been gradually destroyed. The hungry are now expected to buy food produced by biotech companies. And therein lies a grave danger.

Devinder Sharma