

**HOTLINE ASIA
URGENT APPEALS
UA100121(1)**

Safeguard Agrarian Sector and Rich Biodiversity – INDIA

24 March 2010

SUMMARY

Although the commercial introduction of Bt Brinjal was halted on 10 February 2010, the threat of genetically modified (GM) crops is imminent to return, as **Prithviraj Chavan, the Minister of Science and Technology, is proposing the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill which will lower the threshold of introduction of GM crops.**

The Bill includes a draconian clause that whoever, without any evidence or scientific record, misleads the public about the safety of the genetically modified organisms (GMOs), shall be punished with imprisonment or fine. In other words, **civilians who express opinion different from the BRAI or criticism on GMOs will be in danger of punishment, while the BRAI has absolute power to decide which kind of information could be disclosed to public**, depriving civilians' right to information on food. Moreover, the BRAI under the Bill was proposed to be under the Minister of Science and Technology as the sole authority responsible for the regulatory system of GMOs, overriding the decision made by state governments. **Apparently, it seeks to centralize the authority of promotion and regulation under the Minister of Science and Technology in order to stimulate investment in biotechnology, rather than to safeguard health and environment of the country. If passed, the Bill will open the floodgate for about 60 other kinds of GMOs.**

**** Please respond before 30 April 2010 ****

ACTION REQUESTED

It is believed that the BRAI Bill is to be tabled in the upcoming Parliament sittings. Please write polite letters as soon as possible to express your concern and request the authorities to:

1. avert any measures which may degrade the standard of GMO regulation, especially the BRAI Bill; and
2. safeguard food security and civilians' right to information on food.

Send letters to:

1. Dr. Manmohan Singh
Honourable Prime Minister of India,
7 Race Course Road,
New Delhi 110001, INDIA
Fax: 91-11-23015603/ 91-11-23019545/
91-11-23016857/ 91-11-23014255
2. Smt. Sonia Gandhi
Chairperson, United Progressive Alliance,
10 Janpath,
New Delhi 110011, INDIA
Fax: 91-11-23018651/ 91-11-23017047
3. Chairperson
National Human Rights Commission,
Faridkot House, Copernicus Marg,
New Delhi 110001, INDIA
Fax: 91-11-23384863

Send copies to:

1. Shri. Jairam Ramesh
Honourable Minister for Environment & Forests,
Paryavaran Bhavan, CGO Complex, Lodhi Road,
New Delhi 110003, INDIA
Fax: 91-11-24362222

2. Shri. Prithviraj Chavan
Honourable Minister for Science and Technology,
11 Race Course Road,
New Delhi 110001, INDIA
Fax 91-11-23017839

3. Diplomatic representatives of India in your countries.

SAMPLE LETTER

**** This is a sample letter for your reference. Please try to write it on your own and avoid typing 'cc ACPP' on any part of your letter but send copies to us separately for monitoring purpose. ****

We are writing with grave concern about the introduction of Bt Brinjal and the draconian Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill.

The proposed BRAI Bill is apparently an excuse to lower the threshold of introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops and fails to safeguard health of people and environment from harm of the genetically modified organisms (GMOs). It also seeks to imprison whoever criticises GM crops, depriving civilians' right to information and informed choices over food they eat. If passed, the Bill will open gate for cultivation of not only Bt Brinjal but also about 60 kinds of GMOs.

Referring to the experience of GM crops growing, transnational corporations which monopolize the GMOs production are likely to control the agriculture and food system and farmers will be denied of their rights to save, exchange and replant seeds. Actually, this sad lesson has been already learnt through mass suicides of farmers growing Bt Cotton in India. Moreover, scientific research has pointed out that GM crops are harmful to natural environment and human health. **The approval of the BRAI Bill will definitely cause the lapse of public confidence on food imported from India.**

Please be reminded that India is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 1992 and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, a supplement to CBD, which calls for adequate protection of biodiversity, sustainable agriculture and human health from the risk of GMOs and public's full accessibility to information on GMOs.

Therefore, we strongly urge you to:

1. avert any measures which may degrade the standard of GMO regulation, especially the BRAI Bill; and
2. safeguard food security and civilians' right to information on food.

***** Thank You for Your Continued Support! *****

Background

Bacillus Thuringiensis Brinjal (eggplant), also known as Bt Brinjal, is a genetically modified brinjal developed by Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company (Mahyco) where 26% of the stocks are held by a multinational company Monsanto. Although Mahyco claimed that Bt Brinjal is insect-resistant and able to boost the agriculture sector, the experience of genetic modified (GM) crops growing proves otherwise.

Why Oppose Bt Brinjal and GMOs

According to the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development 2008, **there is no evidence that GM crops increase yield; on contrary**, agro-ecological friendly practices have shown result of great increase in yield.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) will not just make the medical function of native species ineffective and toxic, but will also wipe out the native varieties. Once the environment is polluted genetically by GMOs, it will become exclusive to native species and will not be able to recover. Gradually, agriculture will become over-dependent on GM grains and thus food system will be taken over by transnational corporations which monopolize the GMOs production. Moreover, farmers who have started growing the expensive GM crops were unable to stop. This sad lesson has been learnt through Bt Cotton growing in India. Vidarbha, where Bt Cotton is initially grown, has higher rates of farmer suicide than the other part of the country (Please refer to

UA060815(6)), as they have suffered the irreversible effects of Bt Cotton and are forced to buy the expensive pesticides and seeds from the monopolies.

There is greater risk for Bt Brinjal than Bt Cotton, as it is a food crop which can directly affect human body. There is growing evidence that **GM food causes health problems**, such as allergies and negative influence on immune system, organs and metabolism.

Resistance to Bt Brinjal

The Genetic Engineering Approval Committee gave permission to release Bt Brinjal commercially, on 14 October 2009, even though no adequate safety tests were done. Civil society vocally protested its commercial introduction. In addition, 13 governments of state, including Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Orissa, have opposed introduction of Bt Brinjal, to safeguard the health of people and natural environment. Facing strong opposition, on 10 February 2010, Jairam Ramesh, Minister of Environment and Forest, announced the halt of Bt Brinjal's commercial introduction until independent and adequate scientific studies were established.

The Draconian BRAI Bill

However, it is imminent that the Minister of Science and Technology, Prithviraj Chavan, is going to pave way for Bt Brinjal and all GMOs by proposing the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill.

According to the Bill, the BRAI will be set up as the sole body responsible for the regulatory system, including research, transport, import, manufacture and use, of GMOs throughout the country. In the other words, **the BRAI bypasses Right to Information (RTI) and overrides the authority of state governments, as well as the Biological Diversity Act and the Environment Protection Act.**

Moreover, the BRAI is proposed to be under the Ministry of Science and Technology, which is **already responsible for promotion of GM crops. Therefore, the BRAI will be only an agency to stimulate investment in biotechnology, rather than to uphold the standard of GMOs regulation in the country.**

The Bill also includes draconian clauses to stifle anti-GMOs opinion, proposing that whoever misleads the public about safety of GMOs or conducts clinical trials on GMOs shall be punished with imprisonment. Dr. P.M. Bhargava, founder of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, commented on the Bill: "There is no penalty if someone promotes GMOs without safety tests but there is a penalty if someone wishes to inform the public about the hazards of GMOs. Besides, who is to decide on 'misleading' and on what basis?"

Sources

Green Peace, Frontline, GM Watch, thaindian.com, scidev.net, International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development Conference 2008 (Report by UN-World Bank).

Yours sincerely,
Linda Noche
Coordinator

Thank You for Your Continued Support!

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