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BAN TERMINATOR BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

A UNITED NATIONS conference in the Hague next week offers the UN a critical opportunity to ban 'Terminator' seeds before they are commercialised in farmers' fields, warns an alliance of campaign groups.

The ETC group, Berne Declaration and ActionAid are among many groups urging delegates at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 'COP6' conference to heed global opinion and ban the commercialisation of crops modified to produce sterile seeds - known as 'suicide seeds' or 'Terminator technology'.

The alliance warns CBD delegates that seed giants such as Delta & Pine Land intend to commercialise terminator crops and that the world's largest agrochemical and seed corporations continue to work on and win patents on terminator technology and closely related techniques to chemically control plant fertility and/or seed germination.

Terminator plants are modified to prevent farmers from re-using harvested seed, forcing farmers to buy new seeds from multinationals every year.

This is seen as immoral because over 1.4 billion people, mainly poor farmers in poor countries, depend on farm-saved seeds.

Terminator has been universally condemned by civil society groups and farmers movements that consider it an assault on farmers and the well being of all rural people; it has been banned by agricultural research institutes and censured by UN bodies - including Dr Jacques Diouf, director general of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation. India, Pakistan, Ghana and Panama have taken steps to ban terminator.

"The CBD must terminate Terminator before it's planted in open fields," says Hope Shand, research director for ETC group. "Terminator is an anti-farmer technology and clearly isn't dead yet. The CBD must ban it urgently in the Hague and protect farmers' rights and global food security."

Monsanto and Syngenta vowed not to commercialise terminator after widespread public opposition. "The multinational Gene Giants, however, have been refining the technology and Syngenta filed the latest terminator patent

application on 13 September 2001," says Francois Meienberg, from the Berne Declaration (see their new research at http://www.evb.ch/index.cfm?page_id=1275). DuPont won its newest Terminator patent on 2 October 2001.

Civil society and farmers' organizations dismiss arguments that terminator has a role to play in controlling the escape of engineered genes from GM crops to related plants (known as 'gene flow'). "Terminator as a biosafety tool is a spurious argument," says Hope Shand. "The ultimate goal of seed sterility is neither biosafety nor agronomic benefits, but biosefdom."

The groups also urge the CBD to uphold and strengthen its moratorium on 'Traitor technology' - 'Genetic Use Restriction Technologies' - which are GM crops with traits - such as flowering, sprouting, or immune deficiency - which can be switched on and off by applying special chemicals to the plant. "Terminator and traitor crops smash open the idea that GM crops are intended to feed the poor," says Alex Wijeratna, campaign coordinator from ActionAid.

More information:

Hope Shand, ETC group, Tel: + 919 960 5223 (w)

François Meienberg, Berne Declaration, Tel: + 41 1 277 70 04 (w) or 41 79 478 91 94 (m)

Alex Wijeratna, ActionAid, Tel: + 44 207 561 7634 (w) or 0773 649 7412 (m).

Notes to Editor:

1) COP6: The Sixth Conference of the Parties (and 10th anniversary) of the Convention on Biological Diversity in the Hague from 8-19 April will consider, inter alia, GM contamination, Terminator technology and new guidelines on access and benefit sharing.

2) See ETC group's new brochure on Terminator technology at <http://www.etcgroup.org/documents/terminatorbrochure02.pdf> and new DuPont and Syngenta patents: http://www.etcgroup.org/documents/new_termipatent_jan2002.pdf

3) See a new report by the Executive Secretary of the CBD on the impact of 'GURTs' <http://www.biodiv.org/doc/meetings/cop/cop-06/official/cop-06-11-add1-en.pdf>