



ETC Group  
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## **Canada Denies Visa for Africa's Top Biosafety Negotiator**

*Montreal's status as UN's biodiversity headquarters is jeopardized*

*Ottawa* - In a breathtaking display of political interference, the Canadian government has blocked entry of Africa's chief negotiator for the Cartagena (biosafety) Protocol who was scheduled to attend meetings beginning next week in Montreal. The Protocol is the United Nations treaty that governs the international movement of genetically modified (GM) organisms.

Dr. Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, the Ethiopian government's chief scientist and its representative to the Montreal-based UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) had his passport returned without the requested Canadian visa yesterday, and without explanation.

The renowned scientist submitted his passport to the Canadian embassy on May 5 and had planned to fly to Oslo, Norway for inter-regional negotiations prior to attending the Montreal meetings that begin Wednesday, May 25. Because his passport was returned May 17, Dr. Tewolde was forced to miss the Oslo meeting.

### **Labeled dangerous?**

Officials at Foreign Affairs and Citizenship and Immigration have been unable to offer an explanation for rejecting the negotiator's visa. Dr. Tewolde has been in Canada often over the past decade, participating in intergovernmental negotiations on biodiversity and biosafety. Since the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, Dr. Tewolde has been one of the most well known leaders among African diplomats addressing environmental issues. However, his positions have not been popular with the Canadian government.

During the negotiations on a UN treaty on crop genetic resources adopted in Rome last year, Dr. Tewolde spoke on behalf of all developing countries in demanding the right of farmers to save and exchange seeds and in opposing "life patenting" (intellectual property over biological products and processes). In the negotiations that led up to the Cartagena Protocol, the Ethiopian clashed with his Canadian counterparts, demanding higher standards to prevent GM contamination. At UN meetings in Montreal and around the world, Dr. Tewolde has spoken passionately against Terminator technology (genetically modified seed rendered sterile at harvest time, forcing farmers to buy new seeds each growing season). In February, the Canadian government was prepared to dismantle a de facto moratorium on Terminator at a UN biodiversity meeting in Bangkok. Canada was deeply embarrassed (and highly criticized) when its position became known.

The Ethiopian scientist had made it known that he would be coming to Montreal next week to press for the labeling of genetically modified seeds and food products, and for companies and governments to accept liability when their seeds lead to GM contamination. Canada has thus far failed to ratify the UN biosafety protocol and is known to be opposed to both GM compulsory labeling and liability.

“I had planned to participate in these negotiations and continue with trying to help finalize the unfinished business of protecting biodiversity and human beings,” wrote Dr. Tewolde in a letter sent today to colleagues around the world.

**Montreal's UN future in doubt:** In 1995, the Canadian, Québec, and Montreal governments persuaded the United Nations to locate the Secretariat for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal. One of the critical requirements for hosting a major UN agency is easy access for foreign diplomats to attend intergovernmental discussions.

“In barring Dr. Tewolde from participating in the Montreal meetings, Canada is jeopardizing Montreal's future as a United Nations city,” said Eric Darier, a campaigner with Greenpeace in Montreal, “If Ottawa is doing this for its own political purposes, it is making a grave mistake and tarnishing Canada’s reputation in the process.”

“Dr. Tewolde is one of the most respected scientists in his field,” said Pat Mooney, Executive Director of ETC Group in Ottawa, “If the Canadian government can’t make sure Dr. Tewolde has his visa for the opening of the meetings, Canada does not deserve to host the Convention on Biological Diversity.” ETC Group is a Canadian-based international civil society organization with observer status in the United Nations. Mooney talked with Dr. Tewolde by telephone today.

Dr. Tewolde himself is concerned that Canada’s actions signal a pattern, “Now that I have been prevented from coming to Montreal, who knows which ones of you will be prevented next time?” he wrote.

Dr. Tewolde is the recipient of a number of awards and honors for his work in defending biodiversity and the environment. In particular, he received the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize).

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The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC Group is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. [www.etcgroup.org](http://www.etcgroup.org). The ETC Group is also a member of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Programme (CBDC). The CBDC is a collaborative experimental initiative involving civil society organizations and public research institutions in 14 countries. The CBDC is dedicated to the exploration of community-directed programmes to strengthen the conservation and enhancement of agricultural biodiversity. The CBDC website is [www.cbdcprogram.org](http://www.cbdcprogram.org)