

Focus-on-Trade is a regular electronic bulletin providing updates and analysis of trends in regional and world trade and finance, with an emphasis on analysis of these trends from an integrative, interdisciplinary viewpoint that is sensitive not only to economic issues, but also to ecological, political, gender and social issues. Your contributions and comments are welcome.

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One year ago, Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae climbed onto a truck during a mass demonstration against the World Trade Organisation in Cancun, Mexico, and killed himself with a small Swiss army knife. He died a few hours later, tens of thousands of miles from his family and the land he loved. But he died with political intent and, in doing so, gave courage and purpose not only to the peasant's movement, but to millions of farmers, workers and ordinary citizens whose work and lives are under constant attack by global capitalism.

Every year, thousands of farmers commit suicide, driven to despair by debt and poverty. Tens of thousands more leave their homes, no longer able to work their land or feed their families. Many more millions of women and men cling to the edges of existence, eking a precarious living from the fragile land as the tide of agri-business laps at their feet.

The crisis engulfing rural communities in the South and the North is not inevitable: it is the predictable consequence of an agricultural system which treats food as a commodity to be produced for profit and foreign exchange rather than an integral and essential part of human life, culture and society. Despite his description of the peasantry "a sack of potatoes" Marx was acutely aware of the crisis of capitalist agriculture. In *Capital*, he wrote: "All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil." (John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, Monthly Review Press, 2000, p.156). Almost 140 years later, the robbery continues.

In this issue of Focus on Trade Raj Patel looks at the parallel rise of industrial corporate agriculture and its systemic alternative "food sovereignty". Shalmali Guttal explores why thousands of farmers are committing suicide every year in the Indian state of Karnataka and Isabelle Delforge exposes the contradictions between Thailand's aspirations to be the "kitchen of the world" and food sovereignty. Finally, Gerard Greenfield shows the thin line between controlling food production as a weapon of war and as a tool of capitalism, naming the companies that happily do both.

Please contact us c/o CUSRI, Wisit Prachuabmoh Building, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330 Thailand.
Tel: (66 2) 218 7363/7364/7365, Fax: (66 2) 255 9976, E-Mail: admin@focusweb.org, Website: <http://focusweb.org>.
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THOSE LANDS PAVED NOW – ONE YEAR AFTER LEE KYUNG HAE

By Raj Patel*

Chauvinism seldom makes you wince more than when it appears in the work of people whom you respect. We're used, for example, to Washington's superiority complexes laying waste to the economic and social systems of developing countries, particularly in rural areas. This is a logic of "but if we don't charge, they won't understand that it costs something", a curriculum of a School of Hard Knocks for those already broken by poverty. And when we see this kind of lunacy, we get angry, we criticise, we organise, we amplify the alternatives. What are we to do, though, when we read that the peasantry is "a sack of potatoes" (according to Karl Marx), "not possessed of a liberated consciousness," (Ranjit Guha) with knowledge that is "not worth knowing" (Barrington Moore)?

Well, we do the same thing, albeit under a cloud of disappointment.

Theorists and historians of social change, progressive ones, have often been blind to the potent organising happening in rural areas. Part of the reason is that a largely urban media, academy and government has managed to get away with a great deal sloppy thinking, and through this misrepresentation of the rural has unleashed furies on agriculture that would never have been tolerated in urban areas.

WHAT IS "THE PEASANTRY"?

Take "the peasantry", for example, a term that seems to point to a definable group of people but, on closer scrutiny and without additional detail, ends up pointing to nothing at all. Talk of "the peasantry" is talk of a body of rural people who are assumed to be connected by some fundamental unifying factor. But it's not really clear what this magic essential ingredient is. The people who fall under the banner are both employers and labourers, subsistence and market producers, rich and poor, men and women, in the Global South and the North. There's no one inherent feature that brings people living in rural areas together; no essential peasant romance, just as there isn't an essence to living in a city, or living in Asia, or any other accident looking for substance.

This isn't to deny that there are peasants, but to

observe that those looking for an already unified global peasant class, chewing straw and waiting for the city kids to show them how to foment revolution, are likely to be disappointed. This doesn't negate the possibility of solidarity, to be sure. In fact, in the absence of peasant essentialism, one can think of little else that might bind the struggles borne of so many disparate experiences. And solidarity there can be: witness Vía Campesina, the world-wide organization of rural women, peasants, small farmers, rural workers, indigenous people and Afro-descendants, from Asia, Europe, America and Africa. Via Campesina is the foremost international peasant movement and its rise is a direct result of the systemic capitalist transformation of agriculture. It began with a meeting in 1992 in response to the simultaneous crises of agriculture in Central and South America. Since then it has grown to cover every continent, with an international politics that cedes nothing to mystical ideas of 'the peasantry' but is based in a shared and articulated experience of the global crisis of agriculture.

Of the trends that have led to the current state of agriculture in North and South, the Cold War is perhaps the most important. The 'security' concerns of the last century explain the vast internal subsidies given to domestic producers in the global north, the subsequent overproduction, agro-exporting and dumping of crops, and temporary support for potentially rebellious third world rural populations through commodity price intervention schemes. These trends wrought havoc on those whose livelihood was dependent on agriculture. As Phil McMichael — a sensitive and thoughtful interpreter of these trends — puts it:

"Agro-export dumping undermined the postwar food regime's system of stable prices and managed disposal of food surpluses. World agricultural prices fell from a mean of 100 in 1975 to 61 by 1989 - a 39 percent decline. Bearing no relation to the cost of production, these world prices expressed an emerging corporate food regime that would institutionalize 'green power' through the WTO. The trajectory was one in which agro-exporting states (the EU and the US) were forced through competitive relations to synchronize farm policy as a precondition of the WTO's corporate regime." (McMichael, Philip. "Global development and the corporate food regime, " July 2004.)

Third world debt has also been a nail in the coffin of sustainable agriculture. Rather than moving towards robust and productive agro-ecological systems, indebtedness demands that the fields

of the third world be turned into engines for the repayment of World Bank and IMF loans. Local food needs come second to the demand for the foreign exchange in which these loans are denominated, and which can only be secured through export-agriculture.

Export agriculture is, as it happens, exactly what the WTO is in the business of promoting and regulating, under cover of 'free trade' rhetoric. And it does this to the benefit of a small bloc of powerful people in the North and South. These include the functionaries and ideologues of the WTO, World Bank, US ExImBank, and USAID, but also agriculture companies such as ADM, pesticide companies such as Monsanto, retailers such as WalMart, the oil industry, financiers and ministries of finance, and the cluster of consultants, lawyers, large landholders and government officials in developing countries that support, promote, and pimp for the WTO at home.

While this bloc wins, a broader base of rural poor people loses. Take India, for example. In the most aggressive period of Indian globalization during the 1990s, the period that we're told is responsible for the outsourcing of US jobs today, levels of hunger among the poorest increased, reversing decades of progress in feeding the hungry. Today, 233 million Indians are undernourished, suffering from inadequate intake of calories and micro-nutrients. Net availability of food grains per person has plummeted to levels unheard of since the 1930s economic depression under British colonial rule, even as India produces more millionaires than ever before.

PATTERNS AND DIFFERENCES

What's important here is that the critique is not about the evil North against the hapless South. The food system is far more complex. Only by training our eyes to see the specific predations of agricultural export capitalism can we come to understand the musculature of international agrarian hegemony, the lie of its bones, the flow of its marrow. And we can learn, thereby, how to grab its tail.

The trends of export agriculture are repeated, with regional differences, across the world. Those differences are important, mind. Despite the talk of a 'one-size-fits-all' policy coming from the Bank, and however much the economists there would like to see the real world matching their simplifying assumptions more neatly, the fact remains that Bank policy doesn't play well with history and society. The contingencies of place, history, geography and society invariably shape the ex-

perience of Bank policy in very specific ways. But although the specifics are different, and we must respect those differences, there are general trends in the synchronisations of post-War agrarian policy. These are: deterioration in the conditions of the poorest of the rural poor, concentration of ownership and control of the food system, a deskilling of agriculture and a devaluation of rural culture, corporate welfare, dispossession, exploitation of women's labour, and mobilization against rural social movements. And it is these that motivate the slogan "The WTO Kills Farmers" a slogan made most famous by Lee Kyung Hae, who died a year ago today.

On the leaflet he handed out on the day he climbed the walls around the WTO and took his penknife to his heart, were these words:

"... Once I went to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I could do nothing but listen to the howling of his wife. If you were me, how would you feel?"

"Widely paved roads lead to large apartments, buildings, and factories in Korea. Those lands paved now were mostly rice paddies built by generations over thousands of years. They provided the daily food and materials in the past. Now the ecological and hydrological functions of paddies are even more crucial. Who will protect our rural vitality, community traditions, amenities, and environment?"

"I believe that farmers' situation in many other developing countries is similar. We have in common the problem of dumping, import surges, lack of government budgets, and too many people. Tariff protection would be the practical solution."

It's all here. The recognition of the contours of a common problem (though we might want to take issue with the "too many people" diagnosis), of the pain of the betrayal of agriculture by the market, and of the beginnings of an alternative to the crisis. Tariff protection of agriculture is certainly part of the solution, and one that was dear to Lee – he lost his farm when lower barriers to trade in cattle meant that Australian meat could flood the Korean market. On the day Lee lost his farm, his family found him crying in a cinema, ashamed to show his tears to the sky.

THE ESSENCE OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

But the solution requires more than just higher tariffs. Via Campesina has developed the idea of 'food sovereignty' as a comprehensive alterna-

tive strategy to agro-export capitalism. It's a strategy that asserts the right to autonomy in setting food policy, in defining how we get to eat free of the suffocations of agro-export capital. It asserts that safe, healthy food is a right for all peoples, and furthermore, that decisions on how these rights are realised ought to be made not at some international venue, but by the communities closest to where the food is grown and consumed. It is an internationalist solution that acknowledges the differences, contingencies and politics of place in different areas. It's a politics without guarantees, to be sure: there's no promise that under food sovereignty, widespread progressive policies will sweep the world. But it is a policy that, at its very worst, can be shown demonstrably to be better than the autocracies of export-agriculture under which the poorest live today.

An end to the WTO, hope for diverse local agricultures unified by the experience of agro-export capitalism. This is why September 10 has been declared a day of "Global Action Against Free Trade and for Food Sovereignty" by Via Campesina. Within days of Lee's death, marches around the world linked their local calls for change with the memory of Lee, with chances of "We Are Lee". This was a demonstration not of some spurious peasant unity, but of a unity that had been organised and found purchase in the imaginations of peasant movements around the world. One year on, Lee's commemoration is precisely that – an attempt to remember conjointly, in solidarity an attempt to articulate the varied experiences of activism and resistance to agro-export politics, a moment that speaks the irreducible histories of agrarian struggle. Lee's death is not merely an expression, but a conduit for a new agrarian internationalism around food sovereignty. Via Campesina calls for this death not to be forgotten. We would do well today to heed, take pause and then, in memoriam, take action. What kind of action? Contact your local Via Campesina member organisations to find out.

* Raj Patel is a co-editor of *The Voice of the Turtle* www.voiceoftheturtle.org and works at the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

For more information:

Via Campesina: <http://viacampesina.org>

Annette Desmarais on Via Campesina and the

WTO: [http://www.nsi-ins.ca/ensi/pdf/](http://www.nsi-ins.ca/ensi/pdf/Voices_WTO_Desmarais.pdf)

[Voices_WTO_Desmarais.pdf](http://www.nsi-ins.ca/ensi/pdf/Voices_WTO_Desmarais.pdf)

Lee Kyung Hae in his own words: [http://](http://www.americaspolicy.org/columns/amprog/2003/0309lee.html)

www.americaspolicy.org/columns/amprog/2003/0309lee.html

Some Effects of the Agricultural Export Model in different countries: <http://www.foodfirst.org/pubs/policy>

Peoples' Food Sovereignty: <http://peoplesfoodsovereignty.org>

FARMERS' SUICIDES IN KARNATAKA STATE

By Shalmali Guttal*

Since 1997, the tragedies of suicides by farmers in Karnataka State have caught the attention of the state government, state legislators and the press. Over the past three years, the incidence of farmers' suicides in the state has shown an alarming increase. It is now widely acknowledged in the state that there is a deepening and complex economic and social crisis in rural areas that has not been adequately addressed by any state government over the past ten years.

While it is difficult to pin-point precise numbers, press reports indicate that at least 3000 farmers had taken their lives between the year 2000 and August, 2003. Through the year 2003, regional and local press reported an average of about four farmer suicides per week. These trends have continued into 2004, although reports of suicides have somewhat diminished over the past month. It is not known whether this is because suicides themselves have decreased, or whether they have simply gone unreported and thereby unnoticed by the press.

The State Government and Legislature have not been unresponsive to the tragedy of increasing farmer suicides. Following the directions of the State Legislature in August, 2001, the Government of Karnataka commissioned an Expert Committee to conduct a scientific study of farmer's suicides in the state. The Commission completed and presented its report in April, 2002. Recommendations of the Committee include a range of measures to instill self-reliance and self-respect among farmers, such as the creation of a farmers' welfare fund, a nodal department for welfare of farmers, social security measures, diversification of farm activities, rationalization of credit, regular supply of electricity for agriculture purposes, enhancing irrigation facilities, amendments to the land reforms act, facilities for health care and creating awareness of the harmful effects of alcohol.

Implementation of the Commission's recommendations by the State Government has been slow. Other development institutions in the Karnataka State have also conducted studies on the issue and made recommendations. However, according to some independent experts deeply involved in the agriculture sector, the findings and recommendations of these studies do not adequately

reach the heart of the problem, i.e., the impacts of the severe agricultural crisis faced by farmers—specially small-hold and marginal farmers, and agricultural workers—and the complex triggers that impel farmers to take their lives. In the meantime, farmers' suicides have continued more or less unabated.

WHY DO FARMERS TAKE THEIR LIVES?

Development and policy experts have cited a number of reasons for why farmers take their lives, from heavy debt burdens to alcoholism and depression. Some have suggested that the compensation of Rs. 1 lakh (Rs. 100,000, or approximately US\$2,000) offered to the families of farmers who have committed suicide could be a reason why farmers in distress see suicide as a way out for their families. A few have suggested that because of the compensation amount, suicides for other personal reasons are likely to be reported as distress suicides by family members in order to claim the compensation. But few are willing to accept that the state's economic and financial policy trends have significantly contributed to the economic stress on the state's rural population.

The reasons most commonly cited by farmers' and agricultural workers' organisations, state and local level social justice groups, journalists, and independent researchers who have followed the issues closely include:

- Crop failures resulting from drought, scant or no rainfall, and pest attacks;
- Increasing prices of chemical fertilizers and other essential inputs;
- Poor quality of seeds, fertilisers and pesticides;
- Failed bore-wells and all-around scarcity of water for agriculture and household use;
- Poor or non-existent power supply;
- Collapse of prices of agriculture commodities, accompanied by inadequate or non-existent crop insurance;
- Mounting household expenses related to health, marriages and deaths of family members;
- Heavy debt burdens, including debt to money lenders and banks;
- Loss of lands and/or distress sale of lands resulting from an inability to repay debts and meet financial obligations;
- Unequal distribution of risk between share-croppers and marginal farmers on one hand, and wealthier land owners and seed companies on the other hand;
- Lack of comprehensive agricultural policy in the state and in the country.

These groups argue that the State and Central

Governments have failed rural populations; in their rush to attract high-end foreign investment, information technology companies and other rapid growth industries, the governments have neglected the needs and aspirations of farming communities.

KARNATAKA: AT THE FOREFRONT OF LIBERALISATION

The tragedy of farmers' suicides, and the severe economic stress that small-hold and marginal farming families face need to be understood in the context of broader economic and policy trends in the state. Perhaps more than any other state, Karnataka has been at the forefront of the liberalization of agriculture for almost ten years. Karnataka was the first state to implement the new agriculture policy in 1996, which ushered in corporate dominated agriculture including floriculture, aquaculture and also the production of special gherkins for export. The state has amended land reform laws to facilitate corporate agriculture and has systematically opened up its agricultural markets, thus exposing its farmers to unregulated competition from outside. Of the 1500 items for which the Indian Government removed Quantitative Restrictions to fulfill its obligations in World Trade Organisation (WTO) regime, most agricultural commodities are produced solely in Karnataka. These include rosewood, sandalwood, gherkin, coffee and ragi (a cereal grass).

Also, in addition to attempting to establish itself as an Information Technology (IT) Centre, Karnataka is also actively trying to establish itself as India's biotechnology centre. Monsanto already has a research centre in Bangalore and the past ten-odd years have seen a mushrooming of biotechnology research initiatives in the state through university programmes and private centres. Most recently, IT and biotechnology companies have displayed interest in collaborative efforts to expand their operations and scope of services. The State Government has continued to actively facilitate the expansion of these two sectors by assisting them in land acquisition and power and water supply, and providing other economic incentives to private companies in these sectors. These facilities have proved to be extremely expensive to farmers in general and small and marginal farmers in particular, who have been confronted with water and power scarcities, loss of lands, mounting debts and a near absence of economic and financial supports.

The tragedy of farmers' distress and suicides has been politicised by various political parties and

their candidates. In the May 2004 state and national elections, electoral candidates from all parties invoked the issue in their electoral campaigns, and in turn accused both, the State Congress Government as well as the national BJP Government of advancing elite interests at the cost of the poor, particularly farming communities. At the same time, however, none of the electoral candidates outlined a clear plan of action to address the economic crisis that has resulted in the tragedy of the suicides.

The new coalition government in Karnataka has declared some urgent measures to provide relief to farmers in distress. These measures include improving irrigation in dry areas, restructuring of farm credit, a temporary moratorium on all debt repayments to banks and money-lenders, and enhanced access to seed. The early onset of the South-West monsoons offers significant hope that drought conditions in the state will abate. However, the entrenched agricultural crisis in the state will require more far-reaching and deeper policy shifts by the state government, which are not yet in evidence.

Such policy shifts will not likely be achieved without wider conscientisation and mobilisation of society to rally around the needs and priorities of the state's farmers, who produce bulk of the food and agricultural products consumed by rural and urban populations, as well as industry. Society needs to hear the voices of the farmers, and to appreciate what would have stopped farmers from taking their own lives, and what will stop these tragedies in the future. When a farmer takes his or her life, the economic and social distress of the entire family deepens. The compensation offered by the Government does not assure the family long-term relief or means of meeting livelihood needs. Past trends show deepening rural poverty and distress migration to urban centres where jobs are scarce and insecure, thus entrenching a downward spiral of poverty, hunger and despair. The tragedy of farmers' suicides is society's tragedy, and society must start to show collective responsibility to address it.

* Shalmali Guttal is a senior associate with Focus on the Global South based in Bangalore, Karnataka, India

THAILAND: FROM THE KITCHEN OF
THE WORLD TO FOOD
SOVEREIGNTY

THAILAND: FROM THE KITCHEN OF THE WORLD TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

By Isabelle Delforge*

Mr. Anek Silapapun is sitting in a bright and comfortable meeting room under a massive picture representing his company's top executives showing their respect to the King of Thailand. He is the senior vice president of Crop Integration Business Group, affiliated to Charoen Pokphand Group (CP Group), Thailand's largest corporate empire. CP Group's core business is food production, but its activities stretch from seeds to telecom, and from animal feed to the franchise of the Seven-Eleven retail shops. The group's sales in the year 2002 topped US\$13 billion and its CEO Dhanin Cheravanont is the richest man in Thailand, worth about US\$1.3 billion according to Forbes magazine. (1)

This scene captures the most striking contradictions of Thailand's policies and practices on food, trade and agriculture: a worldwide exporter paying tribute to the nation's most renowned advocate of a "sufficiency economy"; a major dealer in chemical agricultural inputs promoting sustainable and organic agriculture; and finally, a very wealthy agribusiness company building its empire on impoverished farmers.

For years, social movements in Thailand have been challenging the export-oriented economic strategy of the government. The success of the agribusiness sector has led to farmers' bankruptcy, ecological devastation and social disaster. In their diversity, organisations of farmers, consumers, urban poor, NGOs and even some government bodies are now suggesting ways to break away from the cash-crop export-oriented strategy and to move towards a national strategy of food sovereignty.

1. "SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY" IN THE GLOBAL KITCHEN

CP Group's ambition of becoming "the kitchen of the world" (2) has propelled the company to become one of the largest agribusiness in Asia. After initial expansion in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and China, CP Food, affiliated

to CP Group, is now entering the poorer parts of Europe and the Near East in its world conquest.(3) It is exporting processed food, seeds and feed around the world. Since 1971, the company has implemented some production practices learned in the USA, notably contract farming, in an environment still largely dominated by subsistence farmers. Explaining the recent company's involvement in tea production in China, a CP executive said "The obvious thing would have been to plant a subsistence crop, but we felt that an entrepreneurial, commercial approach would bring greater benefit to the locals." (4) For CP, food is business.

In a landmark speech in December 1997, the highly influential monarch addressed the Thai people traumatised by the crisis: "To be a tiger is not important. The important thing for us is to have a self-supporting economy. A self-supporting economy means to have enough to survive. About this, I have often said that a self-sufficient economy does not mean that each family must produce its own food, weave and sew its own clothes. This is going too far, but I mean that each village or each district must have relative self-sufficiency. Things that are produced in surplus can be sold, but should be sold in the same region, no too far so that the transportation cost is minimized. Some other people say that we must have an economy that involve exchange of goods that is called "trade economy", not "self-sufficient economy" which is thought to be unsophisticated. However, Thailand is a country that is blessed with self-sufficient productivity..." (5)

According to this vision, food is survival, livelihood and local development.

Nevertheless, this major exporting company has forged a strong alliance with the King of Thailand who has been actively advocating domestic consumption and "sufficient economy" since the economic crisis in 1997. CP Group is involved in a new company called Suvarnachad Co. established under the patronage of the King of Thailand to create a retail network of "Golden Place" supermarkets. The new supermarkets distribute environmentally friendly goods to improve quality of life of rural Thais, improving their health as well as their marketing opportunities.(6) The company is also running a project promoting diversification among poor farmers in Buri Ram following the King's concept.

DUAL TRACK: CONFLICTING POLICIES

Since then, in a schizophrenic move, the government has been talking about "sufficiency

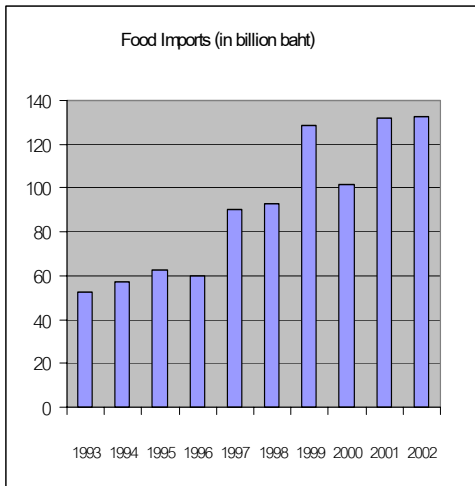
economy" while heavily supporting export-oriented agriculture. At the national level, the government has taken over Charoen Pokphand's mission and set up a "Kitchen of the World" initiative chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak. At the APEC Investment Mart in October 2003, the central piece of the Thai Pavilion was a "kitchen of the world" space boasting the success of the Thai agri-export sector. According to the WTO, Thailand ranked number five in the world leading food exporters in 2001.

However, Viroj Na Ranong, researcher at the Thailand Development Research Institute notes that public funds to support domestic markets and "sufficiency economy" remain insignificant compared to the policies implemented to encourage exports. "Most people like the concept of "sufficiency economy," he explained. In Thai, we also speak about "contented economy": you should be satisfied with what you have, you should not consume too much. It is close to the Buddhist philosophy. But politically, it hasn't had any significant impact. The government tries to do a bit of everything at the same time. It gives some funds to please the King and the NGOs, but exporters always have the big share."(7)

A government supporting two models at the same time is not a Thai speciality. Under consumers and farmers movement's pressure, many governments are now showing some willingness to protect subsistence and sustainable farming and local food production. But at the same time, they keep promoting industrial agriculture for export, a model ideologically supported and imposed by the international financial institutions and backed by heavy pressure from agribusiness. This "dual track" is not only flawed because of the overwhelming priority given to industrial agriculture. It is also inconsistent. On the long run, industrial agriculture undermines the chances for a successful "sufficiency economy" at economic, social and environmental level.

Promoting a "sufficiency economy" in an environment governed by free trade rules is not sustainable. Under various bilateral and multilateral agreements, Thailand has been opening up to the world market. Under the Agreement on Agriculture of the WTO, Thailand has to reduce import tariffs on agriculture at an average of 24% within 10 years from 1995 to 2005. As a result, farmers are increasingly subject to the volatility and the decline of commodity world prices. For example, from 1996 to 2002, the average price per ton on the world market of Thai rice has plummeted by 42%, from US\$1213.69 to US\$704.11.(8) Prices

are going down because of the competition with cheap products imported from rich countries like Australia, the US and the European Union, but also from China. In Thailand, food imports are rising sharply. From 1993 to 2002, food imports have more than doubled, rising in value from 52 to 133 billion baht. (from US\$2 billion to US\$3 billion).(9)



At global level, only 10% of agricultural production is sold on the world market while 90% is consumed in the country where it is grown. (10) Yet in the current neoliberal context, declining prices on the international markets are dictating prices at domestic level, even though most of the food never reaches the global market.

In such situation, small farmers trying to make a living on local and domestic markets may also have to sell their surpluses at prices below production costs. Even if they do not produce for export, they are de facto involved in the world market economy.

Market oriented agriculture has also pushed thousands of farmers out of their land. Rising costs for external inputs, such as pesticides and fertilisers, and depressed prices have contributed to driving farmers into long-term indebtedness. Many used their land as collateral for borrowing and have subsequently lost it because they were unable to repay the loans. A study by the Land Development Department disclosed that market mechanisms played a vital role in the landlessness of farmers. (11) Today, well over a million rural households are landless. (12)

Large extensions have been bought by rich landlords and speculators who left most of it idle or underused. The Land Institute Foundation estimated that about 70 % of Thailand's total area is underused, accounting for an annual economic loss of 127,384 millions baht (or around US\$ 3 millions). (13)

Somsak Yoinchai, a Chiang Mai farmer producing longan (a sweet cousin of the lychee), mainly for export, explains that landlessness impedes the realisation of a subsistence economy in Thailand. "I agree with the "sufficiency economy" concept. It would be possible to base our agriculture on self-reliance. But in order to do that, we need land. If the government is serious about "sufficiency economy", it should redistribute land to every farmer in this country."(14)

ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

In Thailand, the development model promoted since the first National Economic Development Plan in 1961 led to large-scale changes in the agricultural sector. "The traditional farming systems based on diversified production responding primarily to domestic and community needs and dependent only to a very limited extent on external inputs was replaced by a monoculture cropping system promoted and extended by the government in response to external market forces." (15) The promotion of expensive modern varieties requiring increasing levels of chemical inputs has led to widespread soil and water contamination and to the extinction of many traditional varieties.

According to an Asia Development Bank (ADB) report, "the obvious impacts of extensification of Thai agriculture have been deforestation, unsustainable cultivation of hillsides, and vast over-exploitation of dry land areas, not to mention irreversible conversions of fragile and productive coastlands into poorly managed shrimp ponds. Deforestation has contributed to irregularities in rainfall patterns, exacerbating natural flood and drought cycles. From intensification have come the overuse and misapplication of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which then affect water supplies and food safety, as well as threaten the farm workers who use them. Intensification has also led to a number of social problems, contributing to the skewed consolidation of wealth while increasing landlessness, joblessness, and urban migration of the unskilled and unsuccessful." (16)

Even though the ADB is advocating an increase in agricultural production for the world market, this report recognises that "Thailand's past

growth has been based upon destructive patterns of exploitation of natural resources and environmental systems.” “The environment has been significantly degraded to the point where it may impede further economic development”. (17)

Cash crops monocultures have been extremely destructive for the environment. Monocropping depletes soil fertility because of the constant use of the same nutrients. Moreover, cash crops also induce an increase of pesticides use. A report reveals that villagers in northern Chiang Mai are suffering from severe chemical pollution due to tangerine plantations. (18) This area is one of the largest tangerine growing area in the country, a crop that brought in four billion baht in sales last year (US\$ 98 million). Some estimates expect this figure to reach 10 billion in five years (US\$ 245 million). Heavy use of pesticides has polluted the land, the air, but also water wells and ponds. Fishing and collecting greens from ponds is no longer safe. People complain about dizziness, breathing difficulty, chest congestion and allergy in the form of skin rashes and itchiness, but plantation areas keep increasing due to the good economic returns.

The contract farming system makes things worse. The contracting company imposes the amount of chemical inputs to be used to maximise production, regardless of long-term soil conservation. When the land has been too damaged, the company can turn to other producers in Thailand or to any more competitive country, leaving farmers with unproductive resources. Yet, this is the kind of policy that the government is encouraging. For example, in order to boost Thai fruit exports to China within the new bilateral free trade agreement taking effect in October 2003, the ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives announced that farmers will be given 1,500 baht per rai (US\$ 231 per hectare) (19) to start fruit orchards, providing that they have price guarantees under farming contracts. (20) If they are not bound with any contract with an agribusiness company, individual farmers cannot benefit from this scheme. The same month, CP Group was announcing that the company would double its contract farming area to 20,000 rai (3,200 hectares) in anticipation of increased fruit exports to China. (21)

In short, over-exploitation of natural resources to increase market shares is destroying the very basis of a sufficient economy: a healthy and diverse environment. Supporting some self-sufficiency while planning to be the “kitchen of the world” is simply leading the “sufficiency

economy” on a dead end road.

2. ORGANIC AGRICULTURE: A WAY OF LIFE OR A NICHE MARKET?

A second contradiction emerging from Charoen Pokphand’s business practice is its professed interest in chemical free agriculture and health food while it is a major retailer of chemical inputs and hybrid seeds requiring large quantities of pesticides and fertilisers. Chia Tai Group, the pesticides and seeds business of CP Group, has been mixing a wide range of imported agro-chemicals and selling them under its own brand in Asia for years. (21) In 1979, CP also entered into a partnership with US-based DeKalb Genetics Corporation, bought by Monsanto in 1998, to conduct research on hybrid corn and seeds. CP then acquired a quasi monopoly on maize seeds in Thailand. Monsanto’s environmental records are extremely poor, ranging from the production of agent orange, a defoliant used by the US army during the Vietnam war to dioxin contamination due to the production of chemical agricultural products and to the domination of the highly controversial genetically modified seeds on the world market.

At the same time, CP Food is advertising its new policy of “environmental friendliness” (22) and launching its own health food practices, such as cultivation under a net to avoid pest infections. It has recently entered the organic market, producing rice under contract farming for export. According to Mr Anek Silapapun “Organic rice is a new market for us. We produce less than 100 tons a year. But we believe that this is the future. The domestic market is too small: we target the European market. We hope to produce organic mango soon and to develop other organic products in the future.”

In the aftermath of the bird flu outbreak early 2004, CP and the leaders of the poultry industry also convinced the Thai authorities that industrial farming in closed farms was the best way to guarantee food safety. The government launched a plan to modernise poultry farming, providing loans to small farmers to replace open farms with industrial poultry houses. The cost of such an investment has driven thousands of small chicken raisers out of business, consolidating the market position of CP and other major exporters. However, around the world, closed farms have also suffered from avian flu outbreaks. More over, far from being the safest way to go, industrial farming has also created a wide range of safety problems like the development of salmonella bacteria, campy bacteria or antibiotics resistance.

CHEMICAL-FREE THAILAND

Like Charoen Pokphand, the Thai government is now showing a growing interest in organic and health food, after decades of promoting the green revolution package. For the first time, the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) recognised sustainable agriculture, including organic farming. This was the result of years of campaigning and mobilising by farmers' movements and NGOs. The plan sets an ambitious target of converting 20% of arable land to sustainable agriculture, but no concrete actions were taken to meet this goal. Dr Sangsit Piriyarangsarn, a high profile advisor of the former minister of interior and a respected academic even proposed a plan to declare "chemical free Thailand". But this project was dropped when the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra came to power in 2001. As a whole, the use of pesticides in Thailand keeps increasing. Amphorn Kittiampon, director of the National Agricultural Commodity and Food Standard Office, said imports of toxic chemicals had increased by 119% in the past 10 years and the number of people falling ill as a result of chemical-contaminated food and agricultural products increased by 148% within six years. (23)

As for transnational companies, the Thai authorities' interest in safe food and organic agriculture is largely driven by the attraction of foreign markets. One of Thailand's main strategies to remain competitive despite the opening of its agricultural markets to giant producers like China is to increase food safety standards – notably under the "Good Agricultural Practice" and "Good Manufacture Practice" concepts. It is also revealing that one of the few strictly organic projects currently implemented by the authorities is the Department of Export Promotion's "Pilot Project on the Export of Organic Farm Products" initiated in 1999. (24) Besides this project, the Department of Agriculture set up organic standards guidelines and a certification body. To date, most of the producers certified are large exporters.

This move towards sustainable agriculture for export is received with mixed feelings by various social movements in Thailand.

Vitoon Ruenglerpanyakul, director of Greenet, a long time organic rice exporter for the fair trade network, believes that it is clearly good news if more companies are getting involved in organic agriculture and if the government is encouraging them "It means that there will be less chemicals around. Farmers, consumers and the environment will be less exposed to toxic residues." Mean-

while, Greenet is working on a better integration between organic standards and social criteria's.

But the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN) is more critical. According to Pongtip Samranjit of the Rural Reconstruction Alumni and Friends Association (RRAFA), an active member of the AAN "We are trying to convince the government that alternative agriculture is not synonymous with export oriented organic agriculture. Producing for export has led farmers to poverty, dependency and over exploitation of the land." The leaders of the AAN argue that contract farming, even for organic products, allows large companies to take over the control of the whole production process: they lend money to the farmers, they sell them seeds, pesticides and fertilizers and they buy the harvests. "Sometimes, farmers cannot even eat the healthy rice they are producing, because it already belongs to the company," said Samranjit. "They have to buy cheap conventional rice on the market. Monocropping, even for organic products, creates dependency. If the prices drop, farmers do not earn enough to meet ends." The Alternative Agriculture Network first promotes self-sufficiency and production for local markets. Farmers grow a wide range of crops and not only a single cash crop and only if they still have surpluses, they sell them to the global market.

According to Witoon Lianchamroon from Biothai, another organisation involved in the AAN, "The biggest rice exporters, like Capital Rice, are currently producing organic rice under contract farming agreements. Organic farmers involved with NGOs in the North-East are more and more often approached by private companies interested in buying their whole harvest. It looks like an interesting evolution, but I see it as a serious threat for the movement. Those companies see organic agriculture in terms of market, while it is a way of life. They might not use pesticides, but they keep exploiting farmers by giving them a low price and by controlling the production and market chain. This evolution shows us that alternative farming is not only about changing agricultural practices. It is a different way of seeing social relationships. We have to put human beings back into the market. It is like in our traditional local markets: farmers and traders have a sense of responsibility there, they know people's name. Consumers don't need certification at this level. The exchange is based on trust and respect."

Today in Thailand, an estimate of 16, 761.375 rai of farmlands are under organic management

(2,682 hectares). (25) This represents only 0.013 % of the total farmlands and involves about 750 families. In 1995, an independent certification body (Organic Agriculture Certification Thailand) was recognised by international institutions such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and International Organic Accreditation Services. But a much larger part of the agricultural area in the country is managed under alternative agriculture practices, without any certification. The AAN alone works with up to 3470 farming families, at different stages of conversion towards sustainable farming practices. There is a growing domestic market for healthy food and a rapid development of new outlets and companies offering chemical free products to Thai consumers.

For Witoon Lianchamroon, there is a great potential in Thailand for the development of alternative agriculture. "The Thai public is supporting a shift away from chemical agriculture and many farmers are ready to change their practices. But in order to manage this transition, we need to move away from industrialised and export-oriented agriculture and to develop a radically different model," he says. This vision remains miles away from the government's policy to promote safe food for a niche market, mainly abroad, while encouraging further industrialisation of agriculture which implies further over-exploitation of land and water resources, intensive use of hybrid seeds and agro-chemical inputs and further impoverishment of farmers.

3. THE KITCHEN OF THE WORLD WHERE FARMERS GO BANKRUPT

The third contradiction in Thai policies and practices regarding food, trade and agriculture is less visible in the Charoen Pokphand's office. But it is striking everywhere in rural Thailand, where farmers are struggling to survive and to keep their land. CP and other major food groups in Thailand show the picture of a thriving agribusiness sector, based on farming communities going into bankruptcy.

Even if CP's executives assure that "their" contract farmers are "very well off", a Thai journalist who investigated the company practices in the countryside describes the situation as "slavery contract farming". He found that farmers lost all decision power and were shouldering all the risks related to the production. According to his research, farmers were not getting richer, but more indebted in the process.

Veerapon Sopa, an organic farmer in Buri Ram, said many farmers were now dependent on CP. "The company comes and makes wonderful promises to farmers," he said. "In my village, it convinced many of us to start raising chickens for it. Then the exploitation comes. Farmers have to invest a lot of money in the beginning. There is a guaranteed price, but CP always finds a way to pay less, arguing that the farmers didn't respect the standards, that the quality is no good, that the production is late. Then contract farmers become very indebted." (26)

Contract farmers become extremely dependent on the world market's demand and they become factory workers in their own field: The only difference is that they have no company to take the responsibility of securing their jobs, their social welfare, etc.

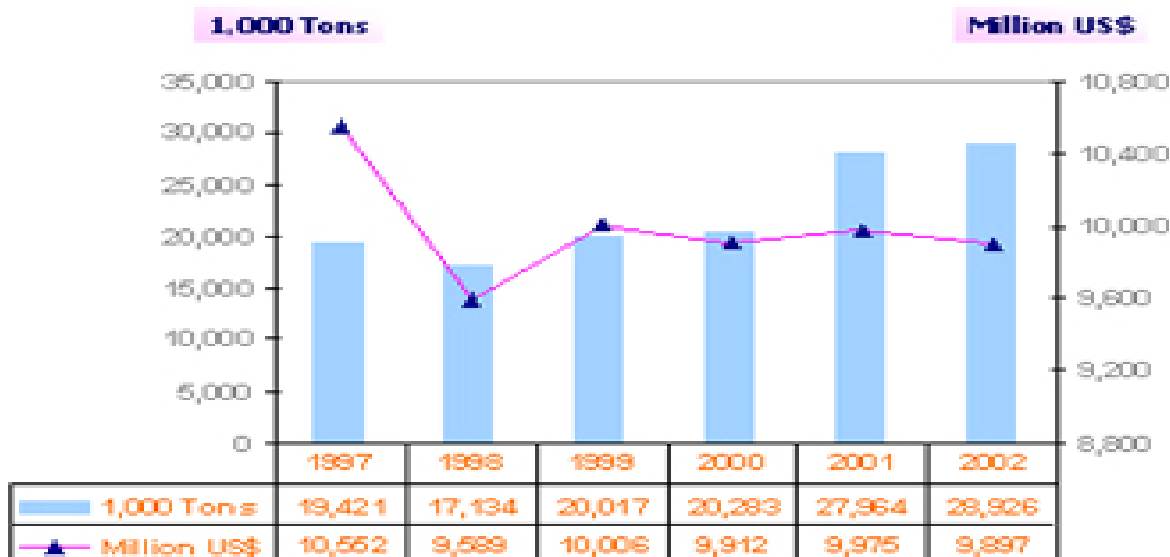
PRODUCING MORE FOR LESS

Since the financial crisis in 1997, even as food exports have been rising, farmers have become increasingly vulnerable. While food exports volumes increased by 49% between 1997 and 2002 (from 19,421 thousand tons in 97 to 28,926 in 2002), the total value has decreased slightly (from 10,552 to 9,997 millions dollars). Thailand is producing more for less. Under the current neoliberal system, because of the constant decline in commodity prices on the world market, the country needs to keep increasing its production only to maintain the same revenue. This obviously puts a growing pressure on farmers' income and on natural resources such as land and water.

Between 1997 and 2000, even if exports shot up, real farm incomes have not increased. On the other hand, farm spending has increased and some years, it even exceed income. It is therefore fair to say that farmers are generally worse off than before the export boom. (27) Farmers' indebtedness gives another indication of producers' hardship in a very successful food exporting country.

From 1988 to 1995, while food exports were shooting up in Thailand, the percentage of indebted agricultural households rose from 22.45% to 60% and the average debt by agricultural household increased more than 10 fold, from 3,777 baht to 37,231 baht (US\$151 to US\$1478). (28) A research report by the Thailand's Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives in 2002 states that the total debt of the agricultural sector was about 411 billion baht (US\$ 9 billion). (29) Because of indebtedness, many farmers have

Thai food export (1997-2002)



Source: National Food Institute/Customs Department

lost their lands and have to work as labourers. More than one million farmers are landless, with an increase rate of 4.05% a year. (30)

According to the National Economic and Social Development Board Office, there were 9.9 million poor people in Thailand in 2001, out of a population of 62 million. Eighty per cent of the poor people lived in rural areas and most of them were farmers, with little land or no land at all.

Thailand is becoming the kitchen of the world, but alarming reports show that malnutrition remains rampant in the country, especially in the rural North-East. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that 19% of Thailand's 62.8 millions people are chronically undernourished. (31) The Ministry of Education conducted a survey in primary and pre-primary schools to assess the number of children suffering from malnutrition. In 2003, out of 6,633,809 students surveyed, more than one million suffered from malnutrition. This had a devastating impact on children's development and learning capacity. (32)

TRADERS GET THE LION'S SHARE

This shows that the success story presented by Thailand all over the world is actually a disaster for the vast majority of the population involved in agriculture and food production. Trade liberalisation in the farming sector, instead of benefiting farmers and workers, has benefited traders, brokers and agribusiness companies.

An analysis of the rice market shows that even though Thailand has become one of the largest rice exporters in the world, this wealth has not been distributed equally between farmers and traders. The producers, mainly small-scale farmers, acquire on average only 24% of the export value, the remaining 76% going to exporters, traders and millers. (33)

AGRICULTURE SECTOR SQUEEZED

If Thailand is now giving a high national and international profile to its ambition of becoming the "Kitchen of the World", boasting the qualities of its 20 million farmers and food workers, this orientation has not been reflected in policy priorities since the sixties. As Walden Bello wrote after the 1997 Asian financial crisis: "Government strategy has been consistently a lopsided, short-sighted one of milking and permanently subordinating agriculture to urban commercial-industrial interests, with little concern for the future of agriculture, rather than a balanced one aimed at gradually reducing the agricultural sector's subsidization of industrialization and making agricultural prosperity instead one of the engines of subsequent industrial growth." (34)

This subordination of agriculture to the interests of the urban-industrial sector has not changed after the 1997 crisis, even though the rural communities and the agricultural sector cushioned the social impact of the economic crisis by providing the "social safety net" for an estimated 1.2 million urban workers to go back to their rural area, and even though this sector still em-

ploys more than half of the total workforce.

Agriculture's share of the GDP of Thailand has declined from more than 30 % in the 1970s to about 9% today. According to an ADB report "Thai economic policy has contributed to the long-term decline in agriculture. Although expenditures by the government are high by regional standards, public investment in agricultural research and investment has been modest ... In addition, trade policies have encouraged the development of capital intensive manufacturing, giving that sector an edge when competing for domestic resources." (35)

Wages in the agricultural sector have also been much lower than in the other sectors. In 2000, the average monthly wage in the farming sector was 3000 baht (US\$ 73.7), while it was 5800 baht (US\$ 142) for the manufacturing sector and 6700 baht (US\$ 164), more than the double, for the average wage in all sectors together. (36)

Behind the glitter of a successful food producer and exporter, the reality reveals a deep crisis in the agriculture and food sector. This picture also shows that the neo-liberal model imposed by financial institutions all over the world does not benefit society as a whole and cannot be trusted as a base for a healthy national economic development. Even in a country like Thailand, where food exports are shooting up, people remain hungry, farmers get poorer, workers are exploited, the environment is exhausted and consumers get contaminated food.

4. TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY ON FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Facing greater inequities, marginalisation and vulnerability, farmers, fisher folks, ethnic minority groups and the workers, rural and urban poor in Thailand have been organising to reclaim a society where social justice prevails.

The number of protests and demonstrations organised every day all over the country gives an indication of the variety and the dynamism of the opposition movements. According to one study, in 1988 there was an average of one demonstration every two days by local communities. This figure increased fourfold in 1994. In 1994, there were 739 demonstrations during the year, and in 1995 there were 754 demonstrations in total. (37)

Behind those protests, long lasting grassroots movements are proposing and implementing

strategies to survive and live a decent life. The way food is produced and distributed among the population is at the heart of this alternative model. In the wide diversity of peoples' struggles, main lines are emerging: communities reclaim the right to control natural resources, they promote sustainable agriculture instead of chemical-dependent production systems, they give priority to self-sufficiency and domestic markets over export-oriented and industrial agriculture. Large movements such as Assembly of the Poor, the Northern Peasant Federation, the Alternative Agriculture Network and many others are also pressuring the government for the right to participate in the policy decision making processes that directly impact them. They assert that food should not be treated as a commodity like any other, because it is a cornerstone of public health, cultural life and livelihood. They are now heading towards a strategy of food sovereignty that reaffirms the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production. (38)

* Isabelle Delforge is a research associate with Focus on the Global South based in Bangkok, Thailand

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Over a ten-year period, from 1961 to 1971, the

AGENT BLUE AND THE BUSINESS OF KILLING RICE

By Gerard Greenfield*

US used an estimated 77 million litres of herbicides as chemical weapons for “defoliation and crop destruction” in Vietnam. Unable to control the Viet Minh’s access to food supplies or their grassroots village support, the US military response was simple: If you can’t control it, kill it. Killing food crops was both a military strategy and - with the procurement of tens of millions of litres of toxic herbicides from US chemical companies — it was also very profitable.

At least 15 different kinds of non-selective or “burn-down” herbicides were purchased from US chemical corporations and shipped to Saigon in 208-litre barrels, each marked with a 10-centimetre coloured stripe identifying its content. These coloured stripes became the code names for each toxic herbicide used as a chemical weapon. Most barrels used in the destruction of mangroves, forests, grasses, bamboo and food crops in Vietnam were marked with an orange stripe to signify they contained a mixture of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T – what became known as Agent Orange.

Fewer in number but still significant were barrels ringed with a blue stripe, containing an arsenical herbicide (cacodylic acid) that starves plants of moisture, killing them by drying them out (dessication). (1) This was Agent Blue. By starving rice plants of moisture, the enemy (including millions of rice-growing villagers) would be starved of their most basic food. With its first recorded use on rice paddies in November 1962, over 4.7 million litres of Agent Blue were sprayed over the next nine years, forming an essential part of the US government’s “rice-killing operations”. (2) According to a new study of US military flight records that exposes far greater use of herbicides in Vietnam than previously thought: “Agent Blue was the agent of choice for crop destruction by dessication throughout the entire war, but more than four million litres of other agents, primarily containing 2,4,5-T, were also used on crops.” (3)

“MADDENINGLY” DIFFICULT TO KILL

Killing rice was a military strategy from the very start of the US aggression in Vietnam. At first, US soldiers attempted to blow up rice paddies and rice stocks, using mortars and grenades. But grains of rice are not easily destroyed and every grain that survived was a seed, to be collected

and planted again. In a report to the International War Crimes Tribunal (founded by Bertrand Russell) at the end of 1967, it was stated that: "The soldiers discovered that rice is one of the most maddeningly difficult substances to destroy; using thermite metal grenades it is almost impossible to make it burn and, even if one succeeds in scattering the rice, this does not stop it being harvested by patient men. And so it is easier to use herbicides since defoliation before the rice is ripe means a 60-90 per cent loss of the harvest." (4)

The rice-killing operations soon became more sophisticated, with rubber or plastic bladders dropped directly into rice paddies, exploding on impact and releasing toxic herbicides. Barrels of herbicides were also dropped into the water irrigating rice paddies, polluting rivers and poisoning the soil and people for the next 40 years.

Arsenical herbicides containing cacodylic acid as an active ingredient are still used today as weed-killers. In the US they are used extensively, from golf courses to backyards. They are also sprayed on cotton fields, drying out the plants before harvesting. (5) So common – and so profitable – is the original commercial form of Agent Blue that it was among 10 toxic insecticides, fungicides and herbicides partially deregulated by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in February 2004. Specific limits on toxic residues in meat, milk, poultry, and eggs were removed. (6)

Used in a less toxic formulation than Agent Blue, severe poisoning from this commercial herbicide "... causes headache, dizziness, vomiting, profuse and watery diarrhea, followed by dehydration, electrolyte imbalance, gradual fall in blood pressure, stupor, convulsions, general paralysis, and possible death within 3 to 14 days." (7) Imagine the suffering, then, of those who were directly exposed to the bombardments of Agent Blue in rice paddies.

It is ironic that the link between the commercial products of US agro-chemical companies and the US military's chemical weapons program contributed to the decision to end the use of Agents Orange, White, Pink, Green, Purple and Blue. As Gabriel Kolko observed: "The Nixon administration finally ended the program not because of public outcries or moral afterthoughts but because the spraying in Vietnam left insufficient

herbicides for US domestic users...." (8)

Four decades later, the companies that manufactured these chemical weapons are facing a renewed public outcry. On 30 January 2004, the Vietnam Association for Agent Orange Victims (VAAOV) launched a class action lawsuit against a dozen US chemical companies in a US Federal Court in New York. (9) This includes Dow Chemical, the company responsible for the 1984 Union Carbide tragedy in Bhopal, India, that cost 20,000 lives and injured 140,000 people – a crime for which the company has not been punished for 20 years. The VAAOV lawsuit also includes the agro-chemical giant, Monsanto, which not only continues to accumulate massive profits from its herbicides, but also profits from the sale of these herbicides in Vietnam through its registered office in Ho Chi Minh City.

Monsanto is also the leading genetic engineering corporation in the world, manipulating the genetic make-up of plants to secure farmers' dependency on its herbicide products, and locking farmers into further dependency through its patents on living organisms. And this is where we encounter yet another tragic irony in the story of the rice-killing business. Within the next three years Monsanto plans to release into the environment its genetically engineered rice varieties, targeting farmers in Asia, including Vietnam.

Not only is 2004 the year in which Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange filed an historic lawsuit against US chemical companies, it is also the United Nations' International Year of Rice. Adopting the slogan 'Rice is Life', the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) declared that this year is "...an opportunity to celebrate and promote the ecological, social and cultural diversity of rice-based production systems as a prism through which key global concerns can be addressed." (10) But it is an opportunity already lost. More accurately, it has been sold off. As the agency in charge of the International Year of Rice, the FAO has chosen this moment to support the genetic engineering industry. (11) No longer is there any talk of the cultural importance of rice or bio-diversity, or of the need to support ecologically and socially sustainable rice production. No longer is there talk of farmers' rights and livelihoods. Instead, the FAO has declared its support for genetic engineering/agro-chemical giants such as Monsanto, and in doing so supports the corporate takeover of rice – the staple food of more than half the world's population

So the International Year of Rice presents itself

as an opportunity for unfinished business. Companies that were involved in the US military's rice-killing operations are now telling us that they hold in their hands the future of rice. 'Rice is Life' – that is why the US government dedicated so much money and military power to killing it in Vietnam. And that is why US corporations are targeting rice today, because taking over rice means taking over life. And for those who resist this, who want to farm rice without poisoning their fields or themselves with toxic chemicals, who want to keep rice free of corporate patents, and who want to protect rice because it is life, they are faced with a new kind of battle. Because the philosophy of the powerful political and corporate elites remains unchanged: If they can't control it, they'll kill it.

* Gerard Greenfield is an independent researcher based in Bangkok, Thailand. gerard_greenfield@yahoo.com

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