In mid-January 1997, the European Parliament approved legislation relaxing requirements to label genetically engineered food as such.

Under the Novel Food Regulation, some 80 per cent of genetically engineered foods will escape labelling requirements because the genetically engineered ingredients are deemed to be "chemically identical" or "substantially equivalent" to conventional foods.

Existing national regulations applying to the labelling of genetically engineered foods will no longer apply, and no national state will be able to impose stronger labelling laws. Legislation passed by The Netherlands, for instance, requiring all genetically engineered products to be labelled as such is now overruled.

A recent MORI public opinion survey found that 78 per cent of those surveyed in Sweden were "not happy to eat genetically engineered food", 77 per cent in France, 65 per cent in Italy and The Netherlands, 63 per cent in Denmark and 53 per cent in Great Britain. An earlier survey found that 78 per cent of those surveyed in Germany were opposed to food derived from genetic engineering.

The Novel Food Regulation followed approval by the European Commission in December 1996 for Ciba Geigy's Bt corn to be imported, used and grown within the EU, even though 13 member states opposed such approval. Britain was particularly concerned about the antibiotic resistance which the corn carries.

Austria has challenged this decision on the grounds that the conditions for health and environmental safety, as set out under Article 16 of the 1990 EU Directive on the deliberate releases of Genetically Modified Organisms, have not been satisfied. The EU did not carry out its own safety tests on the corn but relied on information provided by Ciba Geigy. Austria has banned import of Bt corn.

Most of the genetically engineered corn is being processed into gluten for animal feed; some provides corn starch for baby foods, bread, cakes, baking powder, chewing gum, soups and salad dressing.

Ciba Geigy has said that its Bt corn, some 1-2 per cent of the expected US harvest, cannot practically be separated from non-engineered corn. This argument was also given by Monsanto in relation to its genetically engineered soya, although farmers have kept seed from the genetically engineered crop separate to return to the company for next year's sowings. The European Commission approved imports of genetically engineered soya in April 1996; the first shipments arrived in December.

Opposition to the Novel Foods Regulation and to the use of genetically engineered soya and corn is gaining momentum. Under pressure from consumers, several food processors and supermarkets in Austria, Denmark, Germany, the UK, France and other countries have stated that they will not use genetically engineered products, or have called for any foods containing them to be labelled which requires separation from non-engineered crops.

Unilever and Nestlé, two of the largest food processors in Europe, have stated that they will not use genetically engineered soya in their products in Austria and Germany, but have not made similar commitments for other countries such as Britain.

US soya exports to Europe are estimated to have fallen by over 10 per cent in the first four weeks of European protests to genetically engineered soya.

WRITE TO food processors and supermarkets demanding the segregation and labelling of genetically engineered foods:

Mr Guy Walker, UK National Manager, Unilever, Unilever House, Blackfriars, London EC4P 4BD
Mr D.C. Hudson, Communications and Corporate Affairs Director, Nestlé UK Ltd, St George's House, Park Lane, Croydon<br>Mr J Sainsbury plc, Stamford House, Stamford St, London W1A, 1DN.
Tesco Superstores Ltd, Tesco House, Delamare Rd, Cheshunt, Herts EN8 5SL
Saftway Stores plc, 6 Millington Rd, Hayes, Middlesex UB3 4AY

CICA CARGILL & HIDROVIA C PESTICIDES & THE WORLD BANK C FOOD & FLOODING IN BANGLADESH C STOP EU PATENTS ON LIFE! C PRAWN FARM VICTORY ADOPT-A-MCDONALD'S BRAZILIAN LAND REFORM CONFLICTS
**Illegal dredging at Cargill port in Pantanal wetlands**

The Bolivian government has begun dredging at the grain port in Puerto Aguirre, owned by Cargill. The dredging is the first engineering work to be carried out as part of the construction of an industrial waterway for barge convoys called the Paraguay-Parana Hidrovia.

The dredging of the port is designed to open the Tamengo channel, Bolivia’s 8-kilometre-long link with the Paraguay river which flows downstream into the Parana river, to convoys of 16 barges carrying soybeans and soyameal.

The dredging is apparently supported financially and politically by Cargill. It is being carried out without environmental safeguards and against the recommendations of environmental impact studies funded by the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

Technical experts from the region and a panel of internationally-renowned hydrologists have raised serious doubts as to whether the alterations of South America’s second most important river system are advisable. Independent studies indicate that even small changes in the level of the Paraguay river may cause irreversible damage to the Pantanal, the world’s largest remaining wetlands ecosystem.

Official studies for the project say that no dredging should take place in the Tamengo channel until additional sedimentation samples are taken, and an adequate waste disposal plan is implemented. They recommend that the planned 16-barge access be reduced to 2 or 4 barges to limit environmental impacts.

Preliminary tests have indicated the presence of heavy metals, hydrocarbons and pesticides in sediments in the channel; disturbing these sediments may endanger the drinking water of at least three cities which obtain their water directly from the channel.

Until now, the only plan for disposing of dredge spoils has been to dump them in the Pantanal wetlands, contaminating wide areas, blocking fish migratory routes, and changing flow patterns in the Tamengo channel in an unpredictable manner.

The Puerto Aguirre grain terminal was originally built with partial funding from the US Agency for International Development. Cargill bought a controlling interest in 1996 and took over operation of the terminal in September. With more land in Bolivia being converted to soya monocultures, Cargill’s export costs to Europe will be lowered if the Hidrovia project proceeds.

For more than three years, a coalition of environmental, social, and human rights groups, and indigenous peoples known as Rios Vivos has pressed for transparency and public participation in the Hidrovia studies. One of the cities potentially affected, Puerto Suarez, recently staged a general strike in protest at the planned dredging and rock removal from the channel.

The Bolivian foreign ministry said a public commitment in 1996 not to proceed with any partial works on the Hidrovia until all environmental studies had been completed. It now appears as if the interests of multinational grain exporters are pre-empting this.

**World Bank downgrades its pesticides policy**

More than 180 NGOs and concerned individuals from around the world have condemned the World Bank for “eviscerating” its commitment to reduce pesticide use in its agricultural projects.

In a letter to Bank President James Wolfensohn, the NGOs described the Bank’s new Operational Policy on Pesticides as “a huge step backwards from a credible commitment to sustainable development and environmentally-sound pest management.”

The World Bank first adopted a policy on pest management in 1985 which required Bank staff to observe 22 operational requirements aimed at minimizing pesticide use and promoting “sound pest management”.

Since then, the policy has been progressively downgraded. In 1992, the commitment to reduce pesticides was removed. The new policy converts most of the operational requirements into non-binding “recommendations”. Only “excessive use” of pesticides need be avoided.

“The Bank appears to be weakening its policies because it is under increasing pressure to actually carry them out”, commented policy analyst with the Environmental Defense Fund, Mimi Kleiner. The Bank has itself documented that hardly any of the requirements of the previous pest management policy were implemented. More generally, another recent internal Bank study found that only half of the Bank’s agricultural projects were satisfactorily achieving their goals.

“Rather than making an effort to live up to its own guidelines”, commented Kleiner, “the Bank appears to be lowering its standards”.

The NGOs concerns are shared by, among others, the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation which has criticized the World Bank for not developing a farmer-centred, participatory approach to pest management. Farmer participation is critical to the success of programmes aimed at reducing pesticide use through Integrated Pest Management. Yet the new Bank policy does not mention the centrality of farmer-driven education and decision-making to IPM.

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Food security and flooding in Bangladesh

Participants at the Second European Conference on the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan (FAP), held in the European Parliament in December 1996 on the topic of “Food Security, FAP and Bangladesh”, re-endorsed a demand for a moratorium on all construction activities scheduled under the embankment scheme until they are endorsed by the people affected.

One of the major objectives of the scheme is to raise agricultural productivity through a combination of flood control measures and further application of Green Revolution technologies. Yet the World Bank’s representative at the Conference admitted that the Plan cannot lead to food security for the undernourished people of Bangladesh.

The construction of massive embankments at a cost of $10 billion was first proposed after the particularly devastating floods of 1987 and 1988. The Flood Action Plan, initiated by the World Bank and other international donors in 1989, scaled down these proposals to 26 components, including studies and pilot projects, at a cost of $150 million for FAP’s first phase.

After much controversy and strong opposition to the Plan from landless peasants and grassroots organizations, political organizations and others, the United Nations Development Programme sent an independent mission to Bangladesh in several ways. Natural wetlands — rivers, khals, beels, lakes and, most importantly, the floodplain — which are important sources of plant and animal foods will become less accessible to poor women and men.

The building of embankments and other water control structures will hamper the free migration, feeding and breeding of numerous fish and other aquatic species which require access to the floodplain ecosystem to thrive. Floodplain fish provide vital nutrients (calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin A and protein), particularly for poor women and children.

Green Revolution agriculture in Bangladesh has focused until now primarily on extracting groundwater for irrigation during the dry winter season. The expansion of agriculture under the FAP is aimed at growing high-yielding varieties during the monsoon season; such crops would rely primarily on surface water irrigation derived from FAP’s various flood and water control structures.

If such agriculture goes ahead, traditional seeds specifically developed by local peasants for the monsoon season — for instance, varieties which are resistant to flooding and grow quickly under rising flood waters — are likely to be replaced by hybrid varieties which require strict regulation of water levels, leading to a potential loss of biodiversity.

The declaration concluded that “in the final analysis, the critical issues related to food security, the ‘Green Revolution’ and the Flood Action Plan raise essentially political questions which need to be resolved through a genuinely democratic and participatory process”.

TO ENDORSE the declaration and for more information, contact: Bangladesh People’s Solidarity Centre, PO Box 10066, 1009 BB Amsterdam, THE NETHERLANDS. Tel/Fax: +31 (20) 693 7681; E-mail: bpsc@xs4all.nl
**New EU “patent on life” directive proposed**

The European Commission has reintroduced a proposed patent directive to cover living organisms and their parts, under pressure from a large industry lobby. The European Parliament, which rejected an earlier “patents on life” proposal in March 1995, is set to vote on the directive on 23 April.

The directive is almost the same as the previous proposal except for some changes in language and the exclusion of germ line therapy. The current draft excludes human beings from patenting, but not any extracted human part. There is no condition of prior informed consent.

**Indian prawn farming victory**

Indian groups campaigning against industrialized prawn farming won a major victory in December 1996 when the Indian Supreme Court outlawed all industrial aquaculture within 500 metres of the coastline.

All intensive, semi-intensive, extensive and semi-extensive prawn farms which contravene the ruling must be dismantled by 31 March 1997. Only “traditional” aquaculture and is calling on its members, which include several governments, to take measures to curb unsustainable aquaculture.

The ruling follows a three-year nationwide campaign initiated by fisherfolk in Tamil Nadu who took legal action in 1994 to prevent their livelihoods being lost to industrial prawn farming.

**Seven Brazilian peasants die in land conflicts in Brazil**

Seven Brazilian peasants, in three separate instances, have been assassinated in 1997 in the ongoing struggle for land rights.

The peasants, whose bodies were “riddled with dozens of bullets,” were all squatters occupying land owned by large haciendas. The MST, which represents the 41,000 landless families in Brazil, took over the Headquarters of the Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform on 15 January 1997 in response to the growing threat from gunmen hired by local hacienda owners to intimidate the members of the Movement.

As of 17 January, they were still occupying the building and holding the Institute’s superintendent hostage. The issue of agrarian reform has been prominent in Brazil since April 1996, when police massacred 19 peasants in Para during a protest.

**Adopt-a-McStore**

The “McLibel” trial ended in December 1996 after two and a half years, the longest trial in British legal history at 314 days. Judgement has been reserved for several months in the libel action brought by McDonald’s against two campaigners who distributed a leaflet “What’s Wrong with McDonald’s?” which criticized the global fast-food chain’s food, practices and environmental policy.

Campaigners are planning the coordinated leafleting of all McDonald’s outlets the Saturday after the judgement has been given, whether it finds in favour of the defendants or not, and thus requesting volunteers to “Adopt a Store”.

**Baby Milk Action**

New research conducted in Bangladesh, Poland, South Africa and Thailand shows that leading baby milk manufacturers are openly violating the World Health Organization’s 1981 code for marketing infant formula.

The study from the London-based Interagency Group on Breastfeeding Monitoring named five companies as having breached the code — Gerber, Mead Johnson, Nestlé, Nutricia and Wyeth.

**Pepsi leaves Burma**

Pepsi-Cola announced in January that it will pull out of Burma. The company has been the target of a consumer boycott. Its franchise-holder publicly supported the SLORC military regime and condemned the country’s democracy movement.