

The Ecologist

Jan/Feb 1998

Campaigns & News

Indian Protest at P&O Port

The British multinational P&O is planning to build a mega-industrial port development in one of India's three designated eco-fragile regions. Dahanu Talukais – the “lungs of Mumbai” – in the state of Maharashtra, was marked as a green/no development zone by the Central Government of India in 1991, and P&O, according to protesters, will be breaking the law if they go ahead with this development. The 32-berth port and the ancillary industries that it would attract will play havoc with the environment of not only Dahanu but also the suburbs of Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Environmental advocate M.C. Mehta has been instructed to begin proceedings for contempt of the Supreme Court of India, unless the corporation's plans are changed. Six thousand fishermen, farmers, tribals and artisans from the surrounding villages took part in a recent rally to protest against the port.

Ten thousand fishermen's families from the fishing villages around Vadhavan would be the worst affected by the scheme, which would also deprive thousands of other fam-

ilies dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. The majority of the population of Dahanu are indigenous tribal people, the Warlis. A report commissioned by P&O in order to get government clearance for the development concluded that the people of the area were economically self-sufficient and that only 3.4% of the local population were in favour of the port. They also found that “A port built in this region will come into direct conflict with the needs of this community ... An industrial port will not only destroy the thriving rural economy, but also convert the existing self-sufficient system into an unsustainable and exploited one.” Not surprisingly, perhaps, P&O failed to release their findings.

In July 1997, the State Environmental Minister admitted on television that the laws protecting eco-fragile areas would have to be changed in order to make the port legal. Reports suggest that tremendous pressure has already been exerted on the Ministry of Environment to make such changes. However, disquiet is growing. A letter from PAIL (People's Alliance for the

Implementation of the Law), a coalition of 14 grassroots and environmental organizations, to the P&O Chairman, urges the company “not to collude with our government in putting your profits above our laws,” and declares its “strongest objection to the UK-based P&O group interfering with the laws of our sovereign nation of India. Our laws have been passed in the interests of the citizens of our land, and should NOT be amended to benefit the stockholders of a UK-based company.”

This is one more example of the might of a transnational corporation riding roughshod over the national laws and local civilians in its host country.

Take Action:

Write registering your protest direct to: P&O's chairman: The Lord Sterling of Plaistow, Chairman, the P&O Group, 79 Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5EJ, England

For further information: contact the People's Alliance for the Implementation of the Law, e-mail: <dahanu@aol.com>

Prawn Cocktail off the Environmental Menu

Representatives of major environmental and community organizations from 14 nations have recently agreed to create an umbrella group to oppose the continued expansion worldwide of destructive industrial shrimp farming. In just the last fifteen years, shrimp aquaculture has been transformed from the traditional endeavour of peasant farmers in China and South-east Asia into a \$6 billion global business. More recently, experts, activists and journalists have begun to document the serious environmental and social problems associated with shrimp farming.

Shrimp farms have destroyed a million hectares of vital coastal wetlands worldwide, particularly mangrove swamps, which are plagued by disease, due to overcrowding and poor water quality, and have brought about social conflict through the displacement of traditional fishing communities.

The principal object of the new action group, Industrial Shrimp Action Network (or ISA), will be to support the efforts of those coastal communities resisting the introduction or expansion of industrial shrimp farming. In India, the struggle has

reached the Supreme Court, which in December 1996 outlawed commercial shrimp farms in the coastal zone; in Honduras, fishing villages on the Gulf of Fonseca have mobilized to persuade the government to enact a moratorium on construction of new shrimp farms; and in Tanzania, plans to establish the first massive shrimp operation in Africa – a ten-thousand-hectare farm on the Rufiji Delta – are generating heated debate.

The ISA Network has now set up working groups to inform consumers in the USA, Canada, Europe and Japan about the true environmental costs of eating shrimps, to consult with outside experts and communities over the development of a set of standards for sustainable shrimp aquaculture, and to expand the alliance between communities and environmental groups in the South.

Further information: Isabel de la Torre, Secretariat for ISA Net, 4649 Sunnyside Ave N, #321, Seattle, Washington 98103; tel: 206 545 1136, fax 206 545 4498; e-mail: <mangroveap@aol.com>

Campaign in Ecuador: Campaña por la Defensa del Manglar, Accion Ecologica. Casilla 17-15-246-C, Ulpiano Paez 118 y Patria. Edf. Placso 3er. piso, Quito, Ecuador

Dam...n the People

The semi-nomadic Himba people of Namibia have lived for centuries beside the Kunene river in Kaokoland, on the border with Angola. However, the proposed Epupa dam hydroelectric project on the Kunene river is threatening their distinctive, self-sufficient way of life. The Namibian government has been adamant that they will not be deterred from build-

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The Ecologist Campaigns & News

This section highlights current campaigns, reports activist news, and provides brief updates on topical issues, compiled by Julian Oram, Janey Francis & Katharine Ainger. Send news items and/or campaigns to:

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ing the dam, despite widespread criticism from a range of sources – even including analysts within the World Bank and the European Union. (The EU's desk officer for Namibia was recently quoted as saying there were "no arguments in favour of the project".) Energy experts call it a white elephant. More water could evaporate from the dam reservoir each year than the capital city of Windhoek uses annually. And quite apart from threatening one of southern Africa's most enduring and successful nomadic cultures, the disruption of the river could damage off-shore fisheries and destroy downstream habitat crucial to wildlife in the arid region.

A classified US State Department states, "Maximizing employment opportunities is clearly a factor in Nampower's [Namibia's electricity utility] thinking." The dam would directly create 4,000 jobs, but few, if any, of the local population are likely to gain employment from the project.

Namibian government minister Hidopo Hamutenya, defending the dam recently on the BBC, said the Himba should accept the dam and "modernize". "They should be in ties and suits," he said, "rather than being half naked and half dressed." Himba leader Headman Wandisa Ngombe is vehement in his opposition: "We don't want it! It will cover our fathers' graves as well as necessary grazing lands. All the headmen agree the dam is undesirable ... If they try to build this dam, then on that day all the Himba here will go to that place and lie down, and they will have to build this dam on top of us."

source: *Survival International*

Take Action:

The Namibian government is becoming increasingly concerned about the level of international criticism it is receiving over the Epupa dam project. To register your protest,

write to: President Sam Nujoma at: His Excellency Dr Samuel Nujoma
Office of the President, State House, Robert Mugabe Avenue, Private Bag 13339, Windhoek, Namibia or fax him at: + 264 612 217 70

For further information: contact Survival International, tel: 0171 242 1441

Global Corporate Rule Declared

A new constitution of global corporate rule for the 21st century is being negotiated in secret in Paris by the OECD, and is to be ratified in May 1998. The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) is the most significant international trade treaty since GATT. Essentially, it will elevate the rights of transnational corporations above those of the public and nation states. Increasingly, the role of democratically elected governments will be confined by international law to developing and implementing economic, social and environmental policies that serve the interests of foreign investors, rather than the broader interests of their own citizens.

One of the most alarming aspects of the MAI is the way that such a momentous international trade treaty has escaped public and media scrutiny. Most people, politicians included, have never heard of it, and the OECD has refused to allow the public to be involved in a proper assessment of its potential effects.

The MAI codifies:

- that transnational corporations have the right to sue governments over "barriers to trade" (e.g. environmental protection and labour laws), but governments do not have a reciprocal right to sue corporations
- that transnational corporations have a legal status equal to that of nation states, and that subsidies and tax breaks for corporations cannot be conditional on requirements for responsible behaviour towards the host country
- that it is illegal for governments to give "preferential treatment" to domestic rather than foreign investors
- that governments cannot favour foreign investors based on criteria regarding human rights, labour, or other records.

Simply, the MAI will reduce the capacity of national and sub-national governments to limit the nature and degree of foreign investment. While corporations are to be granted new rights and powers under the

MAI, they are to have no corresponding obligations and responsibilities related to jobs, workers, consumers, human rights or the environment. Effectively, the MAI will override the laws of individual nation states, which, having signed the treaty, will be locked into the agreement for 20 years.

Developing countries and NGOs have condemned the treaty as an attempt by the developed countries to consolidate the power of multinational companies over nation states, and of the rich countries over the poor. What is more, the MAI will inevitably further fuel the 'race to the bottom' among all countries competing to be the quickest to relax environmental, social and labour standards in order to attract foreign investment. The less wealthy nations, desperate to attract foreign capital, will be all but forced to sign the treaty. But there are strong voices of resistance. Dr Mahathir Mohammad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, says developing countries must reject the proposal. "Otherwise", he says, "they will be colonized by the Western world. That is what the developed countries intend."

An international coalition of environment, development and consumer groups is launching a global campaign against the MAI, following the rejection of its list of demands for reform, which was presented to the OECD at a meeting on 28th October 1997. It is hoped that the campaign will also help to broaden public awareness and education about corporate rule and economic globalization.

Take Action against the MAI:

UK: write to your MP asking him or her to question Margaret Beckett, Secretary of Trade and Industry, over this challenge to democracy.

Send letters to major newspapers asking if they are aware of the treaty, and if so, why they are not covering an issue of this magnitude.

For further information: contact the World Development Movement, tel: 0171 737 6215

Honour for Monk who Ordained Trees

A former Buddhist monk from Thailand, Prachak Pethsing, who ordained trees in order to save them from the axe, has been honoured for his environmental work by Sarvodaya, one of the world's biggest Buddhist movements. Based in Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya was inspired by the work and ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, and gives an annual award to outstanding Buddhists.

For many years Prachak has worked to preserve the Dong Yai forest in the Buri Ram District in North-eastern Thailand, leading villagers in opposing eucalyptus mono-cropping, setting volunteer forest patrols and ordaining trees. He told the villagers, "We cannot be truly happy if

beings which surround us, such as grasses, trees and animals cannot be happy ... All beings must attain enlightenment together with us."

Prachak's environmental actions have created many enemies, particularly among logging firms and government officials. He was forced to leave the monkhood in 1994 following seven charges of violating the law, including trespassing, forest encroachment, and disruption of the public peace. His past three years have been spent mainly in defending himself against these charges. He wrote recently, "After fighting for a long time, I became exhausted and lost my way ... I would rather be a layman,

as I am today, and practise dhamma. I don't want to bother others to have to pay me respect as a monk."

Prachak's humility and dedication continue to inspire many in the social and environmental movements.

Take Action:

Prachak urgently needs support to cover the expenses for his legal struggle (currently US\$2,000). If you would like to make a donation, you can

send a cheque to: INEB, PO Box 19, Mahadthai Post Office, Bangkok 10206, THAILAND or, in the USA, c/o Buddhist Peace Fellowship, PO Box 4650, Berkeley, CA 94704, USA.

Cooking up Soya

Concerned by recent bad press over attempts to thrust genetically modified (GM) soya onto consumers, Monsanto has turned to the corporation's best friend: marketing. The decision to hire advertising agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty comes after a barrage of articles and reports raising doubts over the safety of the GM foods. Monsanto is also nervous about possible legislation in Europe which would require foods containing GM soya to be labelled. Fearing the public may balk at buying products branded with this information, Monsanto is considering launching a pre-emptive advertising strike to rescue the company's image and put a reassuring spin on the reviled soya.

Monsanto is aware of the pitfalls of such a campaign. Present levels of public awareness about GM foods is scant, due to a

conspicuous lack of open information and debate, and current ignorance could work in the corporation's favour, since "what people don't know won't scare them." A 'public information' campaign could backfire badly, however, raising alarm bells in some people's minds for the first time, but the company's hand may be forced by increasing coverage of the issue by environmental and public health campaigners. "Nobody has tried to talk to the public about biotechnology," Monsanto's chief European spin doctor Tom McDermott says. "The large amounts of news coverage have created the need for more information. The average consumer has not made his or her mind up about biotechnology."

It is Monsanto, then, which intends to 'inform' the public. And the most likely form of our education? Tune in and find out!

Customer Risk from Sainsbury Soya

After being informed by a staff member at the check-out in a Bath Sainsbury's supermarket that products containing soya might be genetically engineered, one discerning customer chose to separate his purchases into two piles: those with soya and those without. The process generated some interest from other shoppers, but nothing more. All was entirely peaceful until the arrival of the deputy manager, accompanied by an in-store security guard. At that point the customer was told to leave the store immediately and was escorted out by the security guard.

Having failed to pick up a customer survey form, the customer re-entered the store to collect one, but needed to make a purchase in order to do so. While queuing at the till, he was set upon by the deputy manager and security guard who dragged him out of the store by his neck and arms, spraining his thumb so badly that a hospital check was later necessary. Having been dumped over a railing, the customer was informed that he was banned from ever shopping in Sainsbury's again.

All other discerning customers be warned.

GMOS and BSE: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Two newly published Greenpeace reports have emphasized the potentially disastrous consequences of the use of GMOs in foods, while warning against using consumers as guinea pigs for "invented" organisms.

In one report, Greenpeace outlined the similarities between the risks from BSE and those posed by GMOs. In both cases there is a substantial time gap between the consumption of contaminated foods and potential damage to health, as well as significant scientific uncertainty about the potential long-term effects. The second report details the results of specific farm experiments that cast serious doubt on supposedly safe GMOs. Far from producing "better" crops and animals, the experiments revealed:

- farm animals with genetically engineered hormones that developed lameness, heart disease, ulcers, kidney failure and other diseases
- genetically-engineered plants which

carried new allergy problems

- genetically engineered bacteria (GEB) which unexpectedly killed beneficial soil fungi
- GEB which became toxic to plants
- GEB which escaped into sewers through human error.

These alarming discoveries expose the dangers inherent in the manipulation of life processes. Yet although evidence exists to justify extreme caution in the licensing and patenting of genetically engineered organisms, safety approvals and marketing of new GMO foods are increasingly commonplace.

The lesson from the BSE disaster was that short-term profits should never again be allowed to override public safety concerns. Greenpeace, however, warns that, unfortunately, this is exactly what governments are doing by giving food distributors the green light to sell untested GMOs - any one of which could be the spark for the next food health crisis.

Dead Beet for Monsanto

A team of people digging in a field in the middle of a foggy night may not be the usual picture of nonviolent direct action, but this is exactly what was needed to protect Irish soil in the face of the giant Monsanto.

On 1st May 1997, the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) granted Monsanto the first licence in Ireland for a deliberate release of genetically modified organisms - in this case, Round-Up Ready sugar beet. Genetic Concern!, an Irish group campaigning against genetic engineering, immediately sought a judicial review of the EPA's decision to grant a licence. An interim injunction was granted but proved to be a short-lived victory as it was lifted on 27th May and the sugar beet was planted the same afternoon. A judicial review was granted for the following December, by which time the first crop would have been harvested. Monsanto had said that, if their licences were revoked, they would destroy their own genetically modified sugar beet - with a herbicide.

For Monsanto, the stakes were high. In their submission to the High Court, they stated that "if commercialization in Ireland was delayed by 2003, this would effectively reduce the commercial life of the product to Monsanto by at least 10% of the Irish returns." This would represent a serious loss to the company, which has invested tens of millions of pounds in the research and development of genetic technology.

For the local people, the stakes were higher - to protect their land and themselves from the potential hazards of GMOs. So, on the night of 16th November, a group from the Gaelic Earth Liberation Front (GELF) took up their spades and dug up a 20-acre field of Monsanto sugar beet. In an account of the night's work, one activist wrote that "at the end of the action, there was no sudden sense of great achievement and no real celebrations; instead there was something simpler, a feeling that we came, we dug and we made Ireland GM-free again."

The ensuing publicity was not good for Monsanto, which accused GELF of flagrantly breaking the law - an accusation made by a company which itself had been manipulating the same law to its own ends without consultation. Monsanto is now having to deal with a large-scale debate in the media, and any attempts to sneak the genetically altered crops straight into the environment have been thwarted.

This is the first direct action which GELF has carried out. Similar action has been taken by groups on field test sites in England, Germany and Australia. GELF defines itself "by action, not words, by people prepared to take risks to bring about a sustainable future, free from genetic gambles taken by profit-hungry multinationals."

Red Alert for Ethiopia's 'New' Green Revolution

In Ethiopia, more than 85% of the people live as subsistence farmers growing wheat, teff, sorghum, barley, maize and pulses. Following his election in May 1995, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi pledged that within five years the country would be self-sufficient in food. The government has adopted a green revolution-style strategy, in which extension workers give farmers packages of scientifically derived high-yield seeds and the fertilizers and pesticides such seeds require. The government has already declared the extension programme a great success, and is boasting a 10-fold increase in yield per hectare, claiming that the goal of self-sufficiency will now be reached within three years.

However, critics of the government's strategy claim that it is economically self-defeating, environmentally destructive and as authoritarian as the policies of the Derg, the ousted military regime that nationalized land, forced farmers onto collective farms and told them what to plant.

In a country where the average per capita income is extremely low, the majority of farmers cannot afford to purchase the newly necessary chemicals, even at government-subsidized prices. Moreover, the 'improved' seeds are designed for uniform, stable environments such as the more unvarying plains of the American midwest. By contrast, the farming areas in Ethiopia are highly diverse, with soil, water and pest conditions varying from one field to

another. This would make the 'improved' seeds very vulnerable to failure, which could result in famine for millions of Ethiopian subsistence farmers.

Another fear is that promoting the new seeds will endanger the rich and unique biodiversity of Ethiopia and possibly wipe out varieties of local seed. Melakou Worede, one of Africa's first geneticists, warns: "You are simplifying life to a single variety and this is what Westerners are suffering from. We need a policy that ensures freedom of choice on what farmers plant, because they are the ones who know best." Although farmers view the improved seeds and their attendant chemicals with suspicion, they are sometimes forced to accept the package as they are tenants on government land.

A programme calling itself Seeds for Survival has been set up to counteract the government's strategy. It is putting its money into 'land-races', the highly diverse crops that Ethiopian farmers have developed over the centuries. Within a single field of land-race wheat, more than fifteen varieties will grow side by side. This means more food security for the farmer as, if one variety fails due to disease or pest, the others are likely to survive. Seeds for Survival's approach is to boost the productivity of the land-races. They have begun by distributing the seeds as a loan, to be paid back after the harvest. The long-term goal is that local seed exchanges will evolve among farmers.

Brazilian Environmental Campaigners Receive Death Threats

Two leaders of the environmental campaign to protect the Mata Atlantica Rainforests in the state of Santa Catarina in south Brazil have been threatened with death by persistent, vicious, anonymous phone calls. Wigold Schaeffer and Miriam Prochnow are widely acknowledged as two of the most important leaders in the environmental movement in Brazil, and their organization - APREMAVI - has played a crucial role in monitoring the forest reserves and embarrassing the authorities into law enforcement.

In 1996 they started a campaign against large-scale pig-production and fish lagoons in the region. The latter had become breeding grounds for mosquitoes, causing health problems of almost epidemic proportion, particularly among children. As a result of this campaign and a court hearing, Prochnow and Schaeffer received further threats. They are also under attack from tobacco growers whose plans to expand their cultivated areas and cash crop production have been frustrated, and from real estate developers who have been prevented from moving into forest-covered areas.

APREMAVI is particularly unpopular with all those who have a vested interest in exploiting the forest area for their own profits. Loggers, large-scale farmers and their political representatives are stepping up their campaign to topple legal mechanisms that have been preventing the destruction of the last remnants of what used to be one of the largest rainforests in the world.

The Brazilian environmental community is increasingly concerned about the death threats to Miriam and Wigold and is calling for urgent action from the international community.

Take Action:

Write to: Sr Dr Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Presidente de Republica, Palacio do Planalto, Brasilia. Fax: +55 61 224 0189 and Exmo. Sr Paulo Afonso E Vieira, Governador do Estado de Santa Catarina, Florianopolis, SC. Fax: +55 48 221 3137

APREMAVI, Wigold Schaeffer & Miriam Prochnow, Caixa Postal 218, Rio do Sul, SCX 89160-000; Tel/fax: +55 47 821 0326; e-mail: <apremavi@rsol.com.br>

In Brief

Polar Bears Suffer Temperature Rise

Polar bears are under threat due to dramatic temperature rises in the Arctic region, according to a latest report by Greenpeace investigators. Temperatures have risen by five degrees Celsius in the last 30-40 years - a change that would normally have taken place over a period of hundreds of thousands of years. In late August, the Greenpeace expedition leader reported that there was so little ice that he could not tell the difference between the ocean and the icecap. The Bering Glacier in Alaska has also shrunk by 10-12 kilometres in length during the past century. What this means for the polar bears is that the essential first step of their food chain, the arctic algae, is now endangered.

Breast Cancer Scam

Breast Cancer Awareness Month was invented by ICI in 1987, and is now funded by an ICI spin-off, Zeneca Pharmaceuticals. The Awareness Month focusses on early detection of breast cancer through mammography; it is not about prevention. Zeneca plays a dual role in the cancer business. On the one hand it earns \$300 million each year from sales of the carcinogenic herbicide acetochlor, while at the same time earning \$470 million each year marketing the world's best-selling cancer therapy drug, tamoxifen citrate. It also operates a chain of 11 US cancer treatment centres. Clearly, cancer prevention would conflict with Zeneca's business plan.

Shell Nominated for Award!

Despite worldwide criticism of its operations, Shell was recently put forward for an award in Canada. The WWF, with strong support from Prince Philip, proposed Shell for the Minister's Environmental Award on the grounds that the company had given up its marine exploration rights in British Columbia. *Eco-forum Vol 21. No 2*