Bush accuses Europe of starving Africa

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President George Bush went on the offensive last week against Europe over the issue of genetically modified (GM) food claiming that the EU was guilty of starving Africa because it refuses to accept GM imports.

"For the sake of a continent threatened by famine, I urge European nations to end their opposition to biotechnology," he told a conference in Washington organised by the Biotechnology Industry Organisation (Bio). He accused European governments of blocking the import of GM crops on the basis of "unfounded and unscientific fears."

Clearly Bush feels confident in his specialist knowledge of biotechnology and genetic modification. He took up the same issue at the recent US-Africa Business Summit where he told African ministers "some governments are blocking the import of crops grown with biotechnology, which discourages African countries from producing and exporting these crops. The ban of these countries is unfounded; it is unscientific; it is undermining the agricultural future of Africa."

The United States filed a formal complaint with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) last month against the European Union's ban on GM products. US officials again claimed that they were protecting the interests of Africans suffering from hunger who could be fed with GM food.

USAID chief administrator Andrew Natsios has attacked Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe for refusing to accept GM food aid until it was milled to prevent any of the seeds being planted. Natsios told a Congressional panel that GM "presents the highest potential for realising major benefits from biotechnology." He praised Nigeria and South Africa for "embracing" the new technology and opposed the "irrational fear of biotechnology in the European Union."

What is behind the US government's enthusiasm for GM science and its expressed concern for the millions of Africans facing starvation? The evidence suggests that Bush's support for GM science is concerned above all with boosting the flagging profits of major agrochemical corporations that are close supporters of his administration and that his concern for Africa's starving millions is a smokescreen for the interests of big business.

The development of GM crops has been primarily carried out by the major agrochemical corporations. Six corporations—Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer, Dupont, BASF and Dow—controlled 98 percent of the world GM crop market and 70 percent of the pesticide market in 2000. These transnational corporations have used GM technologies to protect their markets in herbicides and pesticides by linking their chemicals to seeds. More than three quarters of the GM crops grown commercially have been engineered to resist herbicides so that weeds can be killed without damaging the crop.

GM seeds must be bought each season or royalties paid if they are kept from one harvest to the next. This then gives the corporations the ability to control seed markets. For example, 91 percent of GM seeds grown in 2001 came from Monsanto. Global agricultural production is in this way being increasingly dominated by a few major corporations.

This growth of monopoly is shown by the fact that 33 percent of the global seed market is now controlled by just 10 corporations, compared to thousands of companies 20 years ago. In the underdeveloped world governments are more easily bullied into accepting GM crops and local firms are easily bought up. In Africa the formal seed sector is now dominated by three corporations, Monsanto, Syngenta and Dupont. In South Africa Monsanto has complete control of the national market for GM seed, 60 percent of the hybrid maize market and 90 percent of the wheat market.

The Bush administration is also concerned about US agricultural exports. The US grows two thirds of the world's GM crops and more than 70 percent of US farms use GM technology. Most food produced in the US now has some GM content. It is estimated that US farmers are losing $300 million a year in corn exports alone as a result of worldwide resistance to GM exports. At least 35 non-EU countries, accounting for up to a half of the world's population, are placing restrictions on GM foods and are demanding that food be labelled if they contain GM ingredients.

The suggestion that starvation in Africa could be tackled by selling more GM crops is a barefaced lie. GM crops have been developed for large-scale commercial systems of production that are rare in Africa where small farmers still predominate, who cannot afford the fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides or irrigation that these crops need.

Growing indebtedness, increasingly worse terms of trade and huge levels of poverty and inequality have devastated agriculture in the Third World. The biggest problems facing farmers are lack of access to basic infrastructure such as irrigation and transport, as well as cheap credit with which to buy inputs.

Agrichemical companies are raising the issue of Africa as a desperate ploy when the claims made about the superior productivity of GM crops are being questioned. Independent studies have shown that yields are not always greater and even when yields increase this does not necessarily offset the increased costs of GM production. More seriously, long-term use results in weeds or insects developing a resistance to the chemicals, so that the amounts applied have to be increased or different types of weed killer employed.

The British *Independent* newspaper cites research carried out by Professor Bob Hartzler of Iowa State University showing that over the last seven years up to five weed species have been found with resistance to glyphosate, a widely used herbicide.

This has not occurred through genes being transferred from the GM crops to the weeds, but simply through natural evolution. The occurrence of such weeds seriously undermines the claims made by corporations over the superiority of their GM crops.

As the US administration turns to more aggressive methods to impose GM products on the world, European governments are backing away from their previous moratorium on GM crops. EU Agricultural Commissioner Franz Fischler recently proposed that no legislation against GM crops would be imposed EU-wide. Rather the "coexistence" of GM farmers and organic and non-GM farmers would be permitted in member states, though how genetic contamination would be prevented, or its prevention funded, is not specified.

European opposition to GM crops has taken the form of scare stories about "Frankenfoods" and played on consumer fears following the recent epidemic of Mad Cow Disease. But its purpose has been to protect European agribusiness, particularly the increasingly important organic sector, against US competition. Green and environmental arguments have been used for this purpose.

Under increasing pressure from the US administration and the transnationals some countries with a smaller agricultural sector are now likely to accept GM farming. British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently sacked his long-standing minister for the Environment Michael Meacher, who had expressed concerns over the introduction of GM technology.

There are possible health and environment problems with GM technology. Meacher pointed to research, which has been ignored by the British government, that showed genetically modified DNA in food was transferred to bacteria in the human gut. But adequate long-term scientific testing cannot and will not be carried out when giant corporations and governments willing to go to any lengths to defend their profits dominate agriculture.

Under a system not dominated by profits scientific developments could indeed assist agriculture in the developing world. But developing a GM crop can cost up to $300 million and take up to 12 years. For that reason research into crops that could help farmers in poor countries is less than 1 percent of total GM research and has little chance of being put into practice because the potential for profit is small.