PARAGUAY AND MONSANTO: THE SEEDS OF DISCORD

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- Global Struggle [1]

SUMMARY: “On August 6, Paraguay's Health and Social Welfare Ministry's sanctioned the genetically modified (GM) corn VT Triple Pro, produced by the US-based transnational corporation Monsanto. Peasant organizations oppose the decision as “a direct attack against peasant culture and food sovereignty.” The decision will most likely have a major impact on small farmers, who have already been hurt by the expansion of genetically modified soya plantations. Farmers have raised concerns about possible genetic contamination of national corn and health effects deriving from the consumption of transgenic corn, said Tomás Zayas, leader of the Alto Paraná Farmers Association, speaking to the non-governmental organization Base Investigaciones Sociales.”

In a controversial move seen by many as proof that Monsanto meddled in Paraguay's domestic affairs, the Franco government has approved the cultivation of genetically modified corn and cotton.

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But even more worrying are the effects this decision could have on indigenous and peasant lifestyle, economy and culture. According to Magui Balbuena from the National Coordination Committee of Indigenous and Rural Women (Conamuri), “What we are seeing in Paraguay is a severe crisis of the rural sector with deteriorating living standards for small producers. The use of genetically modified seeds translates into the destruction of the peasants’ culture and a progressive loss of our food independence.”

The Conamuri is a grassroots organization that promotes alternative farming techniques and food sovereignty, Balbuena adds, “GM soy monoculture cultivation is already at the core of many social and environmental problems in the country, including deforestation, environmental destruction, unemployment, and the concentration of land ownership, which has led to campesinos and indigenous people losing their land.”

No one knows to what extent the decision might exacerbate the already acute problem of unequal land distribution problem in Paraguay. Paraguay has a highly unequal system of land distribution, even by South American standards: 2.5% of the population owns 85% of the land, while 83% of the population owns 6% of the land.

Peasant farmers' long battle to block GMOs

The battle against genetically modified organisms (GMO's) has been going on for years in Paraguay. Many now believe it is one of the factors that brought down the government of Fernando Lugo.

Lugo tried in one way or another to limit the use of GM seeds. Monsanto had plans to introduce GM seeds, but under the Lugo's administration Paraguay's National Service for Plants and Seeds Quality and Health (Senave) refused to accept the seed's use due to lack of approval from the Ministries of Heath and Environment as required by law.
The refusal unleashed a media war, headed by ABC Color – a local newspaper with close ties to Monsanto through the Association of Production Unions (UPG) – against the government officials who declined to approve Monsanto's seeds: Health Minister Esperanza Martínez, Environment Minister Oscar Rivas and Head of Senave, Miguel Lovera.

While the large landowners favored Monsanto seeds, peasant organizations staged frequent demonstrations against approval. The UGP was preparing a demonstration on June 25 against Lugo to pressure for 'liberalization' of genetically modified seeds. But the demonstration never happened. Instead, the Curuguaty massacre occurred on June 15 and by June 22, Lugo had been ousted.

In 2011, Monsanto made $30 million in earnings on which it pays no taxes in the country. Approximately three million hectares (7.4 million acres) of GM soy are grown in Paraguay, producing 7 million tones in 2010. Monsanto is also believed to be behind the approval of a draft biosafety law, presented in August 2011, which includes creating a new Director of Biosecurity within the Ministry of Agriculture, with authority to approve GM seeds for commercial cultivation, according to the Network of Environmental Organizations of Paraguay.

The deteriorating political situation in Paraguay that eventually led to the ouster of President Fernando Lugo, ushered in the new government of Federico Franco. Franco was known to favor Monsanto's request to lift all restrictions on sowing GM seed within the country. After assuming the presidency, he quickly appointed Jaime Ayala, an agrochemicals executive, as head of Senave. Ayala, in turn, immediately added Monsanto's GM Bollgard to the national registry of plant varieties, bypassing full studies. Both corn and cotton had been refused permits by the Lugo government on the grounds of health and environmental risks.

Peasant organizations have responded to the open door to Monsanto policies of the new government by launching the “Operation Monsanto” campaign. The campaign condemns the excessive increase in the supply of genetically modified seeds and herbicides, which they deem disastrous for the land and farmers' health. In mid-August, the group Anonymous Paraguay attacked the websites of national institutions that collaborate with the U.S. company. The movement noted that Operation Monsanto is the first response to the government's decision to boost the use of transgenic seeds of corn and cotton, which are major crops in Paraguay's agriculture. According to the Interamerican Institute of Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) Paraguay cultivates 50,000 hectares of cotton and 995,000 hectares of corn per year.

But how long will these organisations be able to resist. Organizations have filed a complaint against the appointment of Ayala due to conflict of interests and vow that mobilizations will continue. In the meantime the battle against genetically modified seeds in Paraguay is still being played out in the fields.

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