

Stop the Poisonings! Stop Paraquat!

Groups call on Swiss agrochemical giant Syngenta to take responsibility for devastating health impacts and to stop production of this extremely hazardous pesticide

By Jennifer Mourin, PAN AP

Berne/October 17, 2006 -- ***“We appeal to the Swiss people for your support to make Syngenta accountable for the irreversible health effects caused by paraquat,”*** stated Dr Irene Fernandez, Coordinator of the Malaysian NGO Tenaganita (Women’s Force), at the Press Conference organised by the Berne Declaration.

Irene, who is also Chairperson of the Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP), is in Switzerland to join the Berne Declaration in its Public Opinion Campaign, aimed at mobilizing people to participate and vote on whether or not they think the Swiss based Syngenta is responsible for the poisonings, injury and reported cases of death caused by its product. Syngenta is the world’s largest producer of paraquat, which it sells under the trade name ‘Gramoxone’. The Right Livelihood Award recipient (also known as the Alternative Nobel prize) will be in the country till the end of the week on speaking engagements organised by the Swiss watchdog organisation.

“For over 45 years, Syngenta has been selling the poison paraquat for profits and has not taken any responsibility for how their product is used by workers and farmers under conditions and realities of use in the South. Plantation workers have suffered severely, their health destroyed during these years,” Irene told the journalists and press agency representatives gathered in Berne. ***“The effects of paraquat have been known in Malaysia for years, this is not the first time that the women are raising this issue”***, stressed Irene, showing newspaper cutting from as far back as 1986.



The Public Opinion Campaign, which began on September 20 features advertisements with information on the highly hazardous and irreversible health effects of paraquat. The first advert featured examples of effects on plantation workers. Among the two cases featured was the case of the M. Rajam (known in her community as Rajammah), a woman pesticide sprayer from an oil palm plantation in Malaysia who was blinded in one eye after paraquat splashed in her face when she slipped while spraying after a rainy spell.

Rajammah’s case itself became a focus on the Press Conference due to the fact that Syngenta, when asked about the Berne Declaration’s Campaign in an interview by Swiss media, claimed that the picture the organisation used was a fabrication.

In response, PAN AP and Tenaganita organised for a video of Rajammah recounting details of her exposure, for presentation at the Press Conference. ***“Rajammah had to walk seven***

kilometers to get treatment at a clinic when paraquat splashed into her eyes. With no water to wash and no access to immediate treatment, the pesticide affected her and she spent the next two years going in and out of a government hospital, with no improvement. Rajammah subsequently paid RM2,000 (625 Swiss Francs) to a private hospital only to be told that she had lost the sight of one eye. Today, unable to survive on RM85 (26 Swiss Francs) per month from Social security, she is back to work on a tough job of putting chemical fertilizers on palm crops in the plantation” elaborated Irene of Rajammah’s plight.

“These are the real conditions of use in my country Malaysia where paraquat, and especially Syngenta's formulation of it ‘Gramoxone’, is the most widely used” asserted Irene. Irene also took to task the Malaysian governments’ recent shocking decision to temporarily lift (effective November 1, 2006) the ban it announced in 2002, to allow ‘a comprehensive study on its many uses’. “In partnership with the plantation industry, I assert that Syngenta is implicated not only in the maiming of workers, women and communities, but the company has shown total disrespect for the decision made by the government of Malaysia to ban paraquat”.

She concluded with a call to action by the Swiss public: *“Syngenta, being a Swiss based company must be made accountable and responsible for the impact its product has on people anywhere in the world. Today we call on the Swiss people to support us to ensure truth and justice is upheld, and rights and dignity of Rajammah and workers of the South are protected. We cannot restore Rajammah’s eye, but we can prevent the loss of another eye, another human being maimed or hurt, and most of all another life saved”.*

Francois Meienberg, Berne Declaration’s Campaign Director explained about the launch of the Public Opinion Campaign ten days ago with advertisements, the launch of the website and street actions. *“This campaign aims to provoke public debate about whether or not Syngenta is guilty for the thousands of poisonings that occur each year due to their product. We invite people to visit our website: <http://www.paraquat.ch> to give us their opinion.”* Meienberg also responded to Syngenta’s often cited argument that paraquat was useful to the environment, *“we have launched a report which clearly shows that the relationship between paraquat and conservation agriculture is not a given, this is especially since many leading countries in conservation agriculture have already banned paraquat.”*



Also present at the Press Conference was Dr Kirsti Siirala, of the Swedish Chemicals Inspectorate (KEMI), who explained the 1983 decision by the Swedish government to not approve paraquat for use in plant protection. *“In principle, the basis for this decision is still the same”, noted Dr Siirala. “Sweden considers paraquat an extremely hazardous chemical, which can cause severe and irreversible injuries in humans. The characteristics of paraquat are: very toxic to humans when inhaled and also toxic when ingested and in contact with the skin; when human exposures reach detrimental or lethal levels, there exist no antidote; the persons who survive will suffer from prolonged illness; it is*



very toxic to aquatic organisms and considered dangerous to the environment; injures do not only affect agricultural workers but also their very young family members; and relevant documentation on the negative effects and incidents exist”, she explained.

Referring to the Swedish suit to the European Court of justice against the EU’s decision of 2003, ostensibly allowing paraquat to be used albeit with restrictions, Dr Siirala explained, *“Sweden could not support the inclusion of paraquat in Annex I of the Council directive 91/414/EC concerning the placing of plant protection products on the market. In the Swedish view that is not in line with the directive and the precautionary principle as expressed in the treaty of the EU.”* She added, *“In February 2004 Sweden made an appeal to the European Court of Justice against the Commission decision and a request for*

annulment of the directive 2003/112/EC amending directive 91/414/EC to include paraquat. Also other European member states, Austria, Denmark and Finland, are in active support of the Swedish appeal”.

She concluded by asserting that, *“We found paraquat not to be safe to use in Sweden. Due to the fact of extensive use of paraquat in developing countries with considerable less or no work protection and difficulties to use paraquat in the very safe way needed due to its extremely hazardous properties, Sweden has the opinion that we have a global responsibility for not sending contradictory signals that paraquat is safe to use”.*

Expressing the worldwide breath of the danger that paraquat poses to workers and farmers, Sue Longley of the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations), was unequivocal in her assessment, *“Paraquat not only kills weeds, it kills workers, which is why our members, agricultural workers’ unions around the world, are committed to its elimination. There are proven, less toxic alternatives”.*

Of the Malaysian government’s apparent turnaround in its decision to ban paraquat, she expressed IUF’s deep disappointment, *“as the lifting of the ban on one of the most dangerous poisons in the world has very serious implications on workers and farmers health and rights to safe working environment”.* She has also noted ironically that some, *“Palm oil*



plantations in Malaysia had successfully accommodated their production to the ban”.

Having made the journey to Berne explicitly in support of the Bern Declaration Campaign, Sue stressed that, *“The world's largest manufacturer of paraquat, Syngenta, acknowledges the highly toxic nature of paraquat but contends that it can be safely used when the prerequisite precautions are used”* she also noted. *“However, the IUF's experience indicates that these safety measures are often ignored, especially in tropical countries where heat and humidity make personal protective equipment (PPE) uncomfortable for users. Also many farmers do not provide the necessary PPE to employees and workers cannot afford to buy their own - a pair of protective gloves is equivalent to a day's pay in Kenya”.*

Citing the inherent but tragically unacknowledged hazards of agricultural work, Sue asserted that, *“Agriculture is the world's biggest employer, employing about 40% of the world's workforce. Agriculture ranks alongside mining and construction as one of the three most dangerous industries. Agriculture is also heavily reliant on child labour with 70% of the world's child labour taking place in agriculture alone”.*

Sue explained that it is against this background that the IUF is calling for the immediate prohibition of paraquat. *“This is vital in view of the number of fatal poisonings that have occurred with undiluted and diluted paraquat and the inadequate work safety standards due to lack of resources and tropical climates.”* Among the calls that Sue shared at the conclusion of her presentation that, *“based on its toxicological properties – acutely toxic, delayed effects and absence of an antidote, paraquat should be categorized in WHO class Ia or Ib. The World Health Organization should reassess the hazard classification of paraquat”.*



For more information on the Campaign see Berne Declaration website:
<http://www.paraquat.ch/> (Note: text is currently in German and French)
And for information on the problems with paraquat, check out: <http://stop-paraquat.net/>