

Statement to Berne Declaration press conference, Oct 17, 2006

## Paraquat

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Rajammah, a women pesticide sprayer in an oil palm plantation in Malaysia 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.

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.

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. 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.

During the last 25 years, women pesticide sprayers have raised their voices through the local media, civil society groups and their union in my country on the hazards, the pain, and the severe impacts on their health and bodies from the use of paraquat, a highly toxic and dangerous herbicide. Their cries have fallen on deaf ears of Syngenta. In its quest for profits, this company has essentially negated the value of human life and dignity.

The plantation industry has not listened either. Instead, women lost their jobs, were sexually harassed, isolated and threatened for daring to speak out about the effects. Victims poisoned, were silenced.

Both industries have blamed the women's ill health and lack of well-being on their lifestyle, poor nutrition and violence in the home.

The truth is that Syngenta, in spite of its growth into one of the biggest players of agrochemicals in the world, has not been able to provide appropriate, effective and safe protective equipment—usable and appropriate for the hot, humid, tropical climate that pesticide sprayers work in daily—in countries such as Malaysia. It is impossible to use

paraquat safely, as the companies claims. As such workers experience loss of vision, blistering and burns in the vaginal area, lung and nerve disorders, severe dermatitis and irreversible damage to their health and well being.

Not only has Syngenta failed to ensure protection from poisoning, and thus safe working conditions, it has also shown no respect for decisions of the Malaysian government. In 2002, the Malaysian government banned paraquat, and with all fairness gave Syngenta three years to clear off all existing paraquat products and remove them from the market. The Pesticide Regulatory Board assured the public that there were cheaper and effective alternatives to paraquat.

Instead of honoring the decision, Syngenta together with the plantation industry mobilized farmers and smallholders into believing that their costs in production will only go up if paraquat is withdrawn from the market. Syngenta maintained its irresponsible behavior with its political public relations strategy—claiming loss of investment for the country; of corporate agriculture taking a step back; and of repercussions to Malaysia's dream of being a biotech hub in Asia.

Today the Malaysian government has weakened its stand and temporarily lifted the ban on paraquat. The hazards remain. The conditions of use unchanged. And the poisoning of workers and farmers continue. But the struggle goes on for justice, truth and dignity of the human person.

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.

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