

Protests successful

On 22 August 2008 the Peruvian Congress voted 66–29 to repeal a controversial presidential decree that would have facilitated the acquisition by large corporations of communal indigenous lands. The vote, which was a major political setback for President Alan García, took place after 11 days of mass mobilisations. Thousands of Peruvians from 65 indigenous groups shut down oil pipelines, took control of large gas fields and blockaded roads. “We are defending ourselves against government aggression”, said Alberto Pizango, president of AIDSESP (Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana/Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Forest). Miguel Palacín Quispe, from CAOI (Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas), said that the new decree was “an instrument to evict communities from their ancestral lands and to destroy traditional forms of labour, economy and organisation: in short, to put an end to the indigenous communities, something that even the dictatorship of Alberto Fujimori could not manage to do.” García sent in the army, and fierce clashes ensued between protesters and the police.

The indigenous groups resorted to protests after talks failed to secure the repeal of the decree. Decree 1015 would have modified law 26505, which makes it necessary, before communal lands can be sold, that two-thirds of the community vote in favour. Decree 1015 would have reduced the required majority to 50 per cent plus one vote and, even more seriously, would have abolished the requirement that the meeting is quorate. In other words, if a community of a 1,000 people held an assembly which only 100 people attended, it would have been enough for 51 people to vote for the proposal for the sale to be authorised. Law 26505 was passed as part of the free trade agreement (FTA) that Peru agreed with the USA in December 2005.

Finnish patent

Fears are growing in some sectors that the world may indeed be heading for a flu pandemic. The British government, for instance, recently decided that it was the biggest risk facing the country, saying that a flu pandemic, which could claim up to 750,000 lives in the UK alone, was “not a question of if but when.” For most of us this is a

fairly alarming prospect, but for others such an event presents merely another opportunity to make money.

According to well-sourced information posted on a blog (www.immunocompetent.com), a tiny Finnish company, Remedal, has filed for patents on nearly all injected or intranasal human vaccines containing an H5 and an N2 antigen. These would be the vaccines required if H5N2 flu, at present affecting poultry and birds, were to mutate into flu that could be passed from human to human. If an H5N2 recombinant were to spark off a pandemic (or threaten to do so), these vaccines would be in great demand.

It is evident that Remedal hasn't the capacity to develop and market a flu vaccine. The only compound it currently produces is a “dietary supplement” that, it says, aids alcohol metabolism, thus reducing hangovers and liver damage. Even here it is looking for another company to buy the compound and commercialise it. So Remedal of Helsinki has no plans to provide the world with pandemic flu vaccines but merely wants to claim a royalty on these vaccines, if its gamble on H5N2 works out. A nice little earner.

For food sovereignty

In August a group of women delegates from CLOC (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo) and Via Campesina took part in a preparatory meeting in Rosario in Argentina for the World Assembly of Women, which will be held as part of the Fifth International Conference of Via Campesina in Mozambique in October 2008. This is an extract from the statement they issued at the end of their meeting:

“We agreed in our deliberations that food sovereignty, as a principle of a political nature that questions the capitalist system in all its expressions, seeks the transformation of society and establishes the need to deepen the struggle against neoliberal policies in support of the defence of land and territory. For this reason we must carry on with the battle against transnationals and free trade agreements that have been destroying peasant agriculture, territory and local food systems. We will continue our struggle to prevent the signing of new agreements and to repeal those already signed. And we reaffirm our commitment to continue fighting against the foreign debt, which operates as a mechanism

of oppression that undermines the sovereignty of our peoples.

For this reason we declare our commitment to deepen the struggle for our rights as women and as peoples, to carry on producing food and to protect our land and nature. It is imperative to guarantee food for everyone and to defend our right to water, land, seeds and the defence of our territories.”

Ecuador bars GMOs?

As part of the process of drawing up a new constitution, the Ecuadorean authorities held a series of forums in different parts of the country to consult the population about genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Time and again peasant farmer organisations, indigenous groups and the general public voted for an Ecuador free of GMOs. Observers said that it was hard to think of another issue over which society was so unanimous. It is easy to understand why. Maize has been cultivated for over 5,000 years in Ecuador. Peasant agriculture centres around three crops – maize, beans and pumpkin. The maize provides physical support for the beans and the beans capture nitrogen from the air, improving the fertility of the soil. It is alarming to think of the damage that the introduction of GM maize could cause to this delicate ecological balance.

Even so, the business sector lobbied hard for the legalisation of GM crops. Large-scale poultry farmers and the poultry industry were in favour, for it is cheaper to import as animal feed subsidised GM maize from the USA than to buy the product from Ecuadorean farmers. PRONACA, a huge company running fully integrated poultry and pork operations, strongly backs GMOs too. In close alliance with Monsanto and Bayer, it currently employs contract farmers, supplying them with a “technology package” of hybrid seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. It would be very simple to switch to transgenic seeds in the place of the hybrids.

It was difficult to reach an agreement between the various groups. The constitutional text, reached by consensus, says: “Ecuador is declared a country free of transgenic seeds and crops. Only as an exception, in the case of national security, with the support of the President of the Republic and approved by the majority of the National Assembly, will genetically modified seeds be allowed.” So the country is declared free of GMOs, but a door is left open....

